The Beast Within

Émile Zola

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I

Entering the room, Roubaud placed the pound bread, the pâté and the bottle of white wine on the table. But the morning, before going down to her post, Mother Victoire must have covered the fire of her stove with such dust that the heat was suffocating. And the deputy station master, having opened a window, leaned on it.

It was Impasse d'Amsterdam, in the last house on the right, a high house where the West Company housed some of its employees. The window, on the fifth floor, at the angle of the mansard roof which turned back, looked out on the station, this wide trench piercing the quarter of Europe, a whole abrupt unfolding of the horizon, which seemed to enlarge still further this afternoon. noon, a gray sky in the middle of February, a humid and warm gray, crossed by sun.

Opposite, under this dusting of rays, the houses in the rue de Rome blurred, faded away, light. On the left, the marquees of the covered halls opened their giant porches, with smoky windows, that of the main lines, immense, where the eye plunged, and that the post office and the boiler house separated from the others, smaller, those of 'Argenteuil, Versailles and the Belt; while the Pont de l'Europe, on the right, cut with its iron star the trench, which one could see reappearing and spinning beyond it, as far as the Batignolles tunnel. And, at the bottom of the window itself, occupying the whole vast field, the three double tracks which came out of the bridge, ramified, drew apart in a fan whose metal branches, multiplied, innumerable, were going to be lost under the awnings. The three switchman posts, in front of the arches, showed their little bare gardens. In the confused erasure of wagons and machines cluttering up the rails, a large red signal stained the pale daylight.

For a moment, Roubaud was interested, comparing, thinking of his station in Le Havre. Each time he came to spend a day in Paris in this way, and went to see Mother Victoire, he was resumed in the profession. Under the marchioness of the main lines, the arrival of a train from Mantes had

animated the platforms; and he followed the machine with his eyes, machine-tender, with three low and coupled wheels, which began to disconnect the train, needy alert, taking and driving back the wagons on the storage tracks. A different machine, powerful one, a machine to express, to two large devouring wheels, parked alone, let go by his fireplace a big black smoke, straight upright, very slowly in the still air. But all his attention was taken by the three-twenty-five train, bound for Caen, already full of its travelers, and which was waiting for its machine. He did not see the latter, stopped beyond the Pont de l'Europe; he only heard her asking for the way, with light, hurried whistles, person that impatience wins. An order was shouted, she answered with a short blow that she understood. Then, before starting, there was silence, the traps were opened, the steam hissed at ground level, in a deafening jet. And then he saw overflowing from the bridge this whiteness which abounded, swirling like a blanket of snow, soaring through the iron frames. A whole corner of the space was white with it, as the heightened fumes of the other machine widened their black veil. Behind, were muffled prolonged sounds of horns, cries of command, shocks of turntables. A tear occurred, he distinguished, at the bottom, a train from Versailles and a train from Auteuil, one going up, the other going down, crossing each other.

As Roubaud was about to leave the window, a voice calling out his name made him lean over. And he recognized, below, on the terrace of the fourth, a young man of about thirty, Henri Dauvergne, chief conductor, who lived there in the company of his father, deputy chief of the main lines, and his sisters, Claire and Sophie, two adorable blondes of eighteen and twenty, leading the household with the two men's six thousand francs, in the midst of a continual burst of gaiety. We could hear the elder laughing, while the younger sang, and a cage, full of island birds, competed in rolls.

—Here! Monsieur Roubaud, are you in Paris then? … Ah! yes, for your business with the sub-prefect!

Again leaning on his elbows, the deputy station master explained that he had to leave Le Havre that very morning by the six-forty express. An order from the head of operations called him to Paris, he had just been lectured on importance. Happy again not to have left his place.

—And madam? asked Henri.

Madame had wanted to come, too, for some shopping. Her husband was waiting for her there, in this room, to which Mother Victoire gave them the key, on each of their trips, and where they liked to have lunch, quiet and alone, while the good woman was detained downstairs, at her health post. That day, they had eaten a bun in Mantes, wanting to get rid of their groceries first. But three o'clock had struck, he was dying of hunger.

Henri, to be amiable, asked one more question:

"And you sleep in Paris?"

No no! they both returned to Havre in the evening by the six-thirty express. Ah well! yes, vacation! We only disturbed you to flank you your package, and immediately to the niche!

For a moment the two employees looked at each other, nodding their heads. But they couldn't hear each other, a frenzied piano was coming to burst into sound notes. The two sisters had to hit it together, laughing louder, exciting the birds of the islands. Then the young man, who was in his turn cheerful, bowed and entered the apartment; and the sous-chef alone remained for a moment with his eyes on the terrace, whence all that youthful gaiety rose. Then, looking up, he saw the machine which had closed its traps, and which the switchman was sending on the train to Caen. The last flakes of white vapor were lost among the great swirls of black smoke, soiling the sky. And he, too, returned to the bedroom.

In front of the cuckoo clock which marked twenty past three, Roubaud had a desperate gesture. What the devil could Séverine linger on like this? She never left it when she was in a store. To overcome the hunger that plowed his stomach, he had the idea of setting the table. The large room, with two windows, was familiar to him, serving at the same time as bedroom, dining room and kitchen, with its walnut furniture, its bed draped in red cotton, its dresser, its round table., his Norman wardrobe. He took napkins, plates, forks and knives, two glasses from the sideboard. It was all extremely clean, and he amused himself by the housework, as if he had played at a dinner party, happy the whiteness of the linen, very much in love with his wife, himself laughing at the good, fresh laugh which she was about to burst out when he opened the door. But, when he had placed the pâté on a plate, and placed the bottle of white wine next to it, he was worried, looked around. Then, quickly, he drew from his pockets two forgotten packages, a small tin of sardines and some Gruyere cheese.

Half-past struck. Roubaud walked up and down, turning his ear towards the stairs at the slightest noise. In his idle wait, passing in front of the mirror, he stopped, looked at himself. He was not growing old, he was approaching forty, without the fiery red of his curly hair having paled. His beard, that he wore whole, remained thick, she too, of a sun-blond. And, of medium height, but of extraordinary vigor, he liked himself, satisfied with his slightly flat head, the low forehead, the thick neck, his round and sanguine face, lit by two large lively eyes… His eyebrows met, brushing his forehead with the jealous bar. As he had married a woman fifteen years younger than himself, these frequent glances, given to the mirrors, reassured him.

There was a sound of footsteps, Roubaud ran to open the door a crack. But it was a newsagent from the station, returning to her house next door. He returned, took an interest in a box of seashells, on the buffet. He knew her well, this box, a gift from Séverine to mother Victoire, her nurse. And this little object was enough, the whole story of her marriage was unfolding. Already three years soon. Born in the South, in Plassans, to a father who was a carter, left the service with the stripes of sergeant-major, a long time mixed postman at the station of Mantes, he had passed postman chief at that of Barentin; and it was there that he had known her, his dear wife, when she came from Doinville to take the train, in the company of Mademoiselle Berthe, the daughter of President Grandmorin. Séverine Aubry was only the youngest of a gardener, who died in the service of the Grandmorins; but the president, her godfather and her tutor, spoiled her so much, making her the companion of his daughter, sending them both to the same boarding school in Rouen, and she herself had such a native distinction that Roubaud had long been content with the desired distance, with the passion of a worker sided for a delicate gem, he considered precious. There was the only novel of his existence. He would have married her penniless, for the joy of having her, and when he had finally emboldened himself, the realization had exceeded the dream: in addition to Séverine and a dowry of ten thousand francs, the president, today in retired, a member of the board of directors of the West Company, had given him his protection. The day after the wedding, he had passed sous-chef at Le Havre station. He undoubtedly had for him his notes of good employee, solid in his post, punctual, honest, of a narrow mind, but very straightforward, all sorts of excellent qualities which

could explain the prompt reception given to his request and the rapidity. of his advancement. He preferred to believe that he owed everything to his wife. He adored her.

When he opened the can of sardines, Roubaud decidedly lost patience. The meeting was for three o'clock. Where could she be? She wouldn't tell him that buying a pair of boots and six shirts took a day. And, as he passed the mirror again, he saw himself, his eyebrows raised, his forehead cut with a hard line. He never suspected her in Le Havre. In Paris, he imagined all kinds of dangers, tricks, mistakes. A stream of blood rose to his head, his former crewman's fists clenched, as in the days when he was pushing wagons. He became again the brute unconscious of his strength, he would have crushed it, in a surge of blind fury.

Séverine pushed open the door, seemed very fresh, very happy.

—It's me… huh? you must have believed I was lost.

In the glow of her twenty-five years, she looked tall, thin and very supple, yet plump with small bones. She was not pretty at first, with a long face, a strong mouth, lighted by admirable teeth. But, looking at her, she seduced by the charm, the strangeness of her large blue eyes, under her thick black hair.

And, as her husband, without replying, continued to examine her, with the troubled and vacillating gaze she knew well, she added:

—Oh! I ran… Imagine, impossible to have an omnibus. So, not wanting to spend the money on a car, I ran… Look how hot I am.

"Come on," he said violently, "you won't make me believe that you come from Le Bon Marché."

But immediately, with the kindness of a child, she threw herself on his neck, placing her pretty little chubby hand on his mouth:-

Naughty, naughty, shut up! … You know very well. that I love you.

Such sincerity went out of his whole person, he felt her remain so candid, so upright, that he hugged her madly in his arms. His suspicions always ended like this. She abandoned herself, loving to be cuddled. He covered her with kisses, which she did not return; and that was even his obscure anxiety, that great, passive child, of a filial affection, in which the lover did not wake up.

—So, you robbed the Bon Marché?

—Oh! Yes. I'll tell you… But first let's eat. What I'm hungry! … Ah! listen, i have a little present. Say: My little gift.

She was laughing in his face, up close. She had put her right hand in her pocket, where she held an object, which she did not take out.

—Say quickly: My little gift.

He laughed too, like a good man. He made up his mind.

—My little gift.

It was a knife she had just bought him to replace one he had lost and had been crying for two weeks ago. He exclaimed, found it superb, this beautiful new knife, with its ivory handle and shiny blade. All of he was going to use it. She was delighted with his joy; and, jokingly, she received a penny so that their friendship might not be cut off.

"Let's eat, let's eat," she repeated. No no! please do n't close yet. I'm so hot!

She had joined him at the window, she remained there a few seconds, leaning on his shoulder, looking out over the vast field of the station. For the moment, the smoke had gone, the copper disc of the sun descended in the mist, behind the houses in the rue de Rome. Below, a shunting machine was bringing the train from Mantes fully formed, which was due to leave at four twenty-five. She pushed him back along the quay, under the marquise, was unhitched. At the back, in the hangar of the Belt, the shock of buffers announced the unexpected coupling of cars that were added. And, alone, in the middle of the rails, with its mechanic and its driver, black with the dust of the journey, a heavy omnibus train machine remained motionless, as if tired and out of breath, with no other vapor than a thin stream emerging from a valve… She was waiting for the way to be opened for her to return to the Batignolles depot. A red signal clicked, faded. She left.

—Are they cheerful, these little Dauvergne! said Roubaud, leaving the window. Do you hear them banging on their piano? … Earlier, I saw Henri, who gave me tributes.

—At table, to table! cried Severine.

And she threw herself on the sardines, she devoured. Ah! small loaf of Mantes was far! It intoxicated her when she came to Paris. She was thrilled with the happiness of having run the sidewalks, she kept a fever from her purchases at Bon Marché. Suddenly, every spring, she was spending her winter savings there, preferring to buy everything there, saying she was

saving her trip there. So, without losing a bite, she did not dry up. A little confused, blushing, she finally dropped the total amount she had spent, more than three hundred francs.

—File! said Roubaud, seized, you are doing well, you, for the wife of a sous-chef! … But you only had to take six shirts and a pair of boots?

—Oh! my friend, unique occasions! … A little silk with delicious stripes! a hat of taste, a dream! ready- made petticoats with embroidered frills! And all that for nothing, I would have paid double in Le Havre… They'll send me, you'll see!

He had decided to laugh, she was so pretty, in her joy, with her look of pleading confusion. And then, it was so charming, this improvised dinette, at the back of this room where they were alone, much better than in the restaurant. She, who usually drank water, let herself go, emptied her glass of white wine, without knowing. The tin of sardines was finished, they started the pâté with the beautiful new knife. It was a triumph, he cut so well.

—And you, let's see, your business? she asked. You make me chat, you don't tell me how it ended, for the sub-prefect.

So he recounted in detail how the COO had received him. Oh! a head wash in order! He had defended himself, had told the real truth, how this little tired sub-prefect had persisted in getting his dog into a first car, when there was a second car, reserved for hunters and their animals, and the quarrel that followed, and the words we exchanged. In short, the chief agreed with him for wanting to enforce the instructions; but the terrible thing was the word he himself confessed : "You will not always be the masters!" He was suspected of being a Republican. The discussions which had just marked the opening of the 1869 session, and the dull fear of the next general election, made the government skeptical. So we would certainly have moved it without the good recommendation of President Grandmorin. He still had to sign the letter of apology, advised and written by the latter.

Severine interrupted him, shouting:

—Hey? Was I right to write to him and pay him a visit with you this morning, before you went to receive your soap… I knew he would get us out of the woods.

“Yes, he loves you very much,” continued Roubaud, “and he has a long arm in the Company… So see what the point of being a good employee is.” Ah! I was not spared the praise: not much initiative, but conduct, obedience, courage, in short everything! Well, my dear, if you had not been my wife, and if Grandmorin had not pleaded my case, out of friendship for you, I was doomed, I was sent to penance, at the bottom of some small station.

She was staring fixedly at the void, she murmured, as if speaking to herself:

—Oh! certainly, he’s a man with a long arm.

There was a silence, and she remained with her eyes widened, lost in the distance, stopping to eat. No doubt she recalled the days of her childhood, over there, at the castle of Doinville, four leagues from Rouen. She had never known her mother. When her father, the gardener Aubry, had died, she was entering her thirteenth year; and it was at this time that the president, already widowed, had kept her near his daughter Berthe, under the supervision of her sister, Madame Bonnehon, the wife of a manufacturer, also a widow, to whom the castle now belonged. ’hui. Berthe, two years older, married six months later, had married M. de Lachesnaye, councilor at the court of Rouen, a small, dry and yellow man. The previous year, the president was still at the head of this court, in his country, when he had retired, after a magnificent career. Born in 1804, substitute for Digne the day after 1830, then in Fontainebleau, then in Paris, then prosecutor in Troyes, general counsel in Rennes, finally first president in Rouen. Rich in several millions, he had been part of the general council since 1855, he had been appointed commander of the Legion of Honor on the very day of his retirement. And, as far as she could remember, she saw him as he still was, stocky and solid, early white, golden white of old blond, brush hair, collar of beard cut short, without mustaches, with a square face that the eyes of a hard blue and the nose big made it harsh. He was rough at first, he made everything around him tremble.

Roubaud had to raise his voice, repeating twice:-

Well, what are you thinking?

She flinched, had a little shiver, as if surprised and shaken with fear.

—But nothing.

—You no longer eat, are you no longer hungry?

—Oh! if… You’ll see.

Séverine, having emptied her glass of white wine, finished the slice of pâté she had on her plate. But there was an alert: they had finished the one pound bread, not a bite left to eat the cheese. There were cries, then laughter, when, upsetting everything, they discovered, at the back of Mother Victoire's sideboard, a piece of stale bread. Although the window was open, it continued to get hot, and the young woman, who had the stove behind her, was hardly cooling off, more rosy and more excited by the unexpectedness of this chatty lunch in this room. About mother Victoire, Roubaud had come back to Grandmorin: another one, that one, who owed him a great candle! Seduced girl whose child was dead, nurse of Séverine who had just cost her mother her life, more late wife of a chauffeur of the Company, she lived badly, in Paris, of a little sewing, her husband eating everything, when the meeting of his milk-child had renewed the bonds of formerly, by making her also a protege of the president; and, today, he had obtained a post for her in the sanitation department, the guard of luxury cabinets, the ladies' side, which is the best. The Company only gave her a hundred francs a year, but she made nearly fourteen, with the receipts, without counting the accommodation, this room where she was even heated. Finally, a very pleasant situation. And Roubaud calculated that if Pecqueux, the husband, had brought his two thousand eight hundred francs for a driver, both for the bonuses and for the fixed, instead of hitchhiking at both ends of the line, the household would have collected more than four thousand francs, double what he, deputy station master, earned at Le Havre.

"No doubt," he concluded, "not all women would like to run the cabinets." But there is no such thing as a stupid job.

However, their great hunger had subsided, and they only ate with a languid air, cutting the cheese into small pieces, to make the feast last. Their words were also slow.

"By the way," he cried, "I forgot to ask you… Why did you refuse the president to go and spend two or three days at Doinville?"

His mind, in the well-being of digestion, had just returned to their morning visit, very near the station, at the hotel in the rue du Rocher; and he had seen himself again in the large, severe cabinet, he could still hear the President telling them that he was leaving for Doinville the next day. Then, as if giving in to a sudden idea, he had offered them to take the six-thirty express that very evening with them, and then to take his goddaughter over

there, to her sister, who had been asking for her for a long time… But the young woman had alleged all kinds of reasons, which prevented it, she said.

“You know, me,” continued Roubaud, “I saw no harm in this small trip. You could have stayed there until Thursday, I would have made arrangements… right? in our position, we need them. It is hardly skillful to refuse their politeness; all the more so as your refusal seemed to cause him real pain… So I did not stop pushing you to accept, until you pulled me by my overcoat. So, I said like you, but without understanding… Huh! why didn’t you want to?

Severine, her eyes flickering, made a gesture of impatience.

—Can I leave you all alone?

—That’s not a reason… Since our marriage in three years, you have been to Doinville twice, to spend a week like this. Nothing prevented you from going there a third.

The young woman’s embarrassment grew, she had turned her head away.

—Finally, that did not tell me. You are not going to force me to do things that I don’t like.

Roubaud opened his arms, as if to declare that he was not forcing her to anything. However, he resumed:-

Here! You are hiding something from me… Last time, would Madame Bonnehon have received you badly?

Oh! no, Madame Bonnehon had always welcomed her very well. She was so nice, tall, strong, with magnificent blond hair, still beautiful despite her fifty-five years! Since her widowhood, and even during her husband’s lifetime, we used to say that she had often had a busy heart. They adored her in Doinville, she made the castle a place of delight, all the society of Rouen came there to visit, especially the magistracy. It was in the magistracy that Madame Bonnehon had had many friends.

“So admit it, it was the Lachesnayes who beat you cold.”

Doubtless, since her marriage to M. de Lachesnaye, Berthe had ceased to be to her what she once was. She was hardly getting good, poor Berthe, so insignificant, with her red nose. In Rouen, the ladies praised his distinction a lot. Also, a husband like his, ugly, hard, stingy, bad. But no, Berthe had shown herself to be decent with regard to her former comrade, she had no specific reproach to address to him.

“So it is the president that you dislike over there?”

Severine, who until then had been responding slowly, in an even voice, was resumed with impatience.

—He, what an idea!

And she continued, in short nervous sentences. You could barely see him. He had reserved a pavilion in the park, the door of which opened onto a deserted lane. He was going out, he was coming home, without anyone knowing it. Moreover, her sister never knew exactly the day of her arrival. He took a car in Barentin, had himself driven at night to Doinville, lived days in his pavilion, ignored by all. Ah! it wasn’t him who bothered you there.

“I’m telling you about it, because you told me twenty times that, in your childhood, he scared you to death.”

—Oh! A big fear! you exaggerate, as always… Of course he hardly laughed. He was looking at you so fixedly with his big eyes that you lowered your head right away. I have seen people get confused, not being able to address a word to him, so much he imposed on them, with his great reputation for severity and wisdom… But me, he never scolded me, I always felt he had a thing for me…

again his voice slowed down, far.

—I remember… When I was a kid and I played with friends, in the aisles, if he ever appeared, everyone was hiding, even his daughter Berthe, who was constantly trembling at being at fault… I was waiting for him, quiet. He was passing by, and seeing me there, smiling, my muzzle raised, he gave me a little pat on the cheek… Later, at sixteen, when Berthe had a favor to obtain from him, it was always me who ’she loaded the request. I spoke, I did not lower my eyes, and I felt his that entered me under the skin. But I didn’t care, I was so sure that he would grant whatever I wanted! … Ah! Yes, remember! Over there, there isn’t a thicket in the park, not a corridor, not a room in the castle, which I cannot evoke by closing my eyes.

She was silent, her eyelids closed; and, on her hot, swollen face, seemed to pass the thrill of those things of old, the things that she did not say. For a moment, she remained like that, with a small flapping of the lips, like an involuntary tic which painfully pulled the corner of her mouth.

“He was certainly very good to you,” continued Roubaud, who had just lighted his pipe. Not only did he have you raised like a young lady, but he

very wisely administered your four under, and he rounded up the sum, at our wedding… Besides he must leave you something, he said it in front of me.

“Yes,” Séverine murmured, “this house in Croix-de-Maufras, this property that the railroad has cut off. Sometimes we would spend a week there… Oh! I hardly count on it, the Lachesnayes have to work on him so that he leaves me nothing. And then, I prefer nothing, nothing!”

She had said these last words in such a lively voice that he was surprised, taking his pipe out of his mouth, looking at her with his rounded eyes.

—Are you funny! It is assured that the president has millions, what harm would it be that No one would be surprised, and that would suit our affairs nicely.

Then, an idea that crossed his mind made him laugh.

“Are you perhaps not afraid to pass for his daughter? … Because, you know, the president, in spite of his icy air, people whisper stiffly about him.” It seems that, even during his wife’s lifetime, all the maids went there. Finally, a fellow who, even today, haunts a woman for you… My God! go, when you are his daughter!

Severine had risen, violently, her face on fire, with the frightened flicker of her blue eyes, under the heavy mass of her black hair.

—His daughter, his daughter! … I don’t want you to joke with that, do you hear! Can I be his daughter? Do I look like him? … And that’s enough, let’s talk about something else. I don’t want to go to Doinville, because I don’t want to, because I prefer to go back to Le Havre with you.

He nodded, he soothed her with a gesture. Candy! as long as it got on his nerves. He was smiling, he had never seen her so nervous. White wine, no doubt. Eager to be forgiven, he picked up the knife again, still ecstatic, wiping it carefully; and, to show that he cut like a razor, he trimmed his nails.

“A quarter past four already,” Severine murmured, standing in front of the Hello. I still have a few errands… We have to think about our train.

But, as if to finish calming herself down, before putting some order in the room, she went back to lean on the window. He, then, letting go of the knife, dropping his pipe, left the table in his turn, approached her, took her from behind, between his arms, gently. And he held her entwined like that,

he had rested his chin on her shoulder, leaning his head against hers. Neither of them moved any more, they watched.

Under them, always, the little maneuvering machines came and went without rest; and you could hardly hear them bustling about, like lively and careful housewives, muffled wheels, discreet whistle. One of them passed, disappeared under the Pont de l'Europe, taking the cars of a train from Trouville to storage, which were disconnected. And over there, beyond the bridge, she brushed past a machine that had come alone from the Depot, like a solitary walker, with its shining brass and steel, cool and cheerful for the journey. The latter had stopped, asking with two short taps the way of the switchman, who almost immediately sent him on his train, fully formed, to the quay under the marquee of the main lines. It was the four-twenty-five train to Dieppe. A flood of travelers was hurrying, we could hear the rolling of carts loaded with luggage, men were pushing one by one the hot water bottles in the cars. But the machine and its tender had approached the lead van with a dull shock, and the foreman was seen to tighten the screw on the drawbar himself. The sky had darkened towards the Batignolles; a twilight ash, drowning the facades, seemed already to fall on the widened range of roads; while, in this effacement, in the distance, the departures and arrivals of the suburbs and the Belt intersect. Beyond the dark tablecloths of the large covered markets, over darkened Paris, reddish, jagged smoke flew away.

—No, no, leave me, Severine whispered.

Little by little, without a word, he had enveloped her in a closer caress, excited by the warmth of this young body, which he thus held in both arms. She intoxicated him with her smell, she finished panicking her desire, arching her back to free herself. With a shake, he lifted it from the window, and closed the windows with his elbow. Her mouth had met hers, he crushed her lips, he carried her to the bed.

"No, no, we are not at home," she repeated. I thee pray, not in this room!

She herself was gray, dizzy with food and wine, still vibrating with her feverish run through Paris. This too heated room, this table where dragged the stampede of the cutlery, the unforeseen of the journey which turned partly thin, everything made her bloody, raised her with a shiver. And yet she refused, she resisted, propped up against the wood of the bed, in a frightened revolt, of which she could not have said the cause.

—No, no, I don’t want to.

He, blood on his skin, held back his big brutal hands. He was shaking, he would have broken her.

—Dumb, will we know? We’ll hit the bed again.

Usually, she abandoned herself with complacent docility, at their place in Le Havre, after lunch, when he was on night duty. It seemed no pleasure to her, showed a happy indolence, an affectionate consent to his own pleasure. And what, at this moment, drove him mad was to feel her like he had never had her before, ardent, quivering with sensual passion. The black reflection of her hair darkened her calm periwinkle eyes, her strong mouth bleeding in the soft oval of her face. There was a woman there whom he did not know. Why was she refusing herself?

—Say why? We have the time.

Then, in inexplicable anguish, in a debate in which she did not seem to judge things clearly, as if she had ignored herself too, she gave a cry of real pain, which made him keep still.

—No, no, I beg of you, leave me! … I don’t know, it’s strangling me, just the idea, at the moment… it wouldn’t be good.

Both had fallen sitting on the edge of the bed. He ran his hand over his face, as if to remove the cooking that was burning him. Seeing him become wise again, she, kind, leaned over, gave him a big kiss on the cheek, wanting to show him that she liked him all the same. For a moment they stayed like that, without speaking, to recover. He had taken her left hand again and was playing with an old gold ring, a golden serpent with a small ruby head, which she wore on the same finger as her wedding ring. He had always known her there.

—My little snake, said Severine in an involuntary dreamy voice, believing that he was looking at the ring and feeling the urgent need to speak. It was at Croix-de-Maufras that he gave me a present for my sixteenth birthday.

Roubaud raised his head, surprised.

—Who? President?

When her husband’s eyes rested on hers, she suddenly woke up. She felt a little cold freeze her cheeks. She wanted to answer, and found nothing, strangled by the sort of paralysis that was seizing her.

“But,” he continued, “you always told me that it was your mother who left it with you, this ring.”

Still at this second, in forgetting everything. It would have been enough for him to laugh, to play dizzy. But she persisted, no longer owning herself, unconscious.

—Never, my darling, I told you that my mother left me this ring.

Suddenly, Roubaud stared at her, turning pale too.

—How? “Or” What? you never told me that? You told me twenty times! … There is nothing wrong with the president giving you a ring. He gave you something else… But why did you hide it from me? why did you lie, talking about your mother?

—I did not mention my mother, my darling, you are wrong.

It was stupid, this stubbornness. She saw that she was getting lost, that wanted to come back, to swallow his words; but it was too late, she felt his features decompose, the admission out in spite of herself from all her person. The cold of her cheeks had invaded her whole face, a nervous tic was drawing her lips. And he, terrifying, suddenly red again, as if he thought the blood was going to burst his veins, had seized her wrists, was looking at her closely, in order to better follow, in the frightened dismay of his eyes, what she did not say out loud.

—For God Sake! he stammered, for God’s sake!

She was scared, lowered her face to hide it under her arm, guessing the punch. A fact, small, miserable, insignificant, forgetting a lie about this ring, had just brought the evidence, in a few words exchanged. And it had only taken a minute. He threw her across the bed with a jerk, he pounded her with both fists at random. In three years, he hadn’t given her a flick, and he was slaughtering her, blind, drunk, in the outburst of a brute, of the man with the big hands, who had once pushed wagons.

—Name of God of bitch! you slept with! … slept with! … slept with!

He was enraged at these repeated words, he slaughtered his fists every time he uttered them, as if to make them enter his flesh.

—The rest of an old man, goddamn bitch! … lying with! … lying with!

Her voice was choked with such anger that she hissed and never came out. Only then did he hear that, slackening under the blows, she said no. She could not find any other defense, she denied that he did not kill her. And this cry, this stubbornness in lying, finished driving him mad.

—Admit that you slept with him.

—No! no!

He had taken her back, he supported her in his arms, preventing her from falling face down on the blanket, like a poor being in hiding. He forced her to look at him.

—Admit that you slept with him.

But, letting herself slip, she escaped, she wanted to run towards the door. With a bound he was on top of her again, his fist in the air; and, furiously, suddenly, near the table, he knocked him down. He had thrown himself at her side, he had grabbed her by the hair, to nail her to the ground. For a moment, they stayed like that on the ground, face to face, without moving. And, in the terrifying silence, we heard the songs and laughter of the Dauvergne girls rise up, whose piano raged, fortunately, below, muffling the noises of struggle. It was Claire who sang little girls' rounds, while Sophie accompanied her with all her arms.

—Admit that you slept with him.

She no longer dared to say no, she did not answer.

—Admit that you slept with, for God's sake! or I'll kill you!

He would have killed her, she could see it clearly in his eyes. As she fell, she saw the knife, open on the table; and she saw the flash of the blade again, she thought he was stretching out his arm. Cowardice invades her, a abandonment of herself and everything, a need to end it.

—Well! yes, that's right, let me go.

So it was abominable. This confession, which he demanded so violently, had just hit him in the face, like an impossible, monstrous thing. It seemed that he would never have imagined such an infamy. banged against a leg of the table. She was struggling, and he pulled her by the hair, across the room, pushing aside the chairs. Every time she made an effort to stand up, he threw her back to the floor with a punch. And that panting, clenched teeth, a savage and foolish relentlessness. The table, pushed, almost knocked over the stove. Of hair and blood remained in a corner of the buffet. When they caught their breath, dazed, swollen with this horror, tired of hitting and being hit, they had returned to the bed, she still on the ground, sprawled, he crouched down, still holding her by the shoulders. And they huffed. Downstairs, the music continued, the laughter flew away, very loud and very young.

With a shake, Roubaud went up Séverine, leaned against the wood of the bed. Then, remaining on his knees, weighing down on her, he was able to speak at last. He no longer beat her, he tortured her with his questions, with the inextinguishable need he had to know.

—So, you slept with, bitch! … Repeat, repeat that you slept with this old… And at what age, eh? very small, very small, isn't it?

Suddenly she had burst into tears, her sobs preventing her from responding.

—For God Sake! do you want to tell me! … Huh? you were not ten years old, that you were amusing him, this old man? That's why he raised you to the beak is for his filth, say it, goddamn it! or I start again!

She was crying, she couldn't utter a word, and he raised his hand, he stunned her with another slap. Three times, as he got no more answer, he slapped her face, repeating his question.

—At what age, say it, bitch! say so?

Why fight? Her being was fleeing under her. He would have pulled his heart out of his stiff fingers of a former worker. And the questioning continued, she said everything, in such a frustration of shame and fear that her sentences, whispered very low, could hardly be heard. And him, bitten by his jealousy atrocious, was enraged at the suffering with which the pictures evoked were tearing him apart : he never knew enough, he forced him to come back to the details, to clarify the facts. With his ear to the lips of the wretch, he was agonizing over this confession, with the continual threat of his raised fist, ready to knock again, if it stopped.

Once again, all the past, in Doinville, paraded, childhood, youth. Was it at the bottom of the massifs of the large park? was it in the lost detour of some corridor of the castle? Was the president already thinking of her when he had kept her, the death of his gardener, and had his daughter brought up? This, for sure, had started, would flee in the midst of their games if he should appear, while she, smiling, her nose in the air, waited for him to give her a little pat on the cheek. And, later, if she dared to speak to him in his face, if she obtained everything from him, was it not that she felt herself mistress, whereas he was buying her by his good, so worthy trousseur complacency? and so harsh on others? Ah! the dirty thing, this old man being kissed like a grandfather, watching this little girl grow, feeling her,

starting her a little every hour, without having the patience to wait until she was ripe!

Roubaud was panting.

—Finally, at what age, repeat, at what age?

—Sixteen and a half.

—You lie!

Lie, my God! Why? She shrugged the shoulders of immense abandon and weariness.

—And the first time, where did it happen?

—At the Croix-de-Maufras.

He hesitated a second, his lips were moving, a yellow glow clouded his eyes.

—And I want you to tell me, what did he do to you?

She remained silent. Then, as he brandished his fist:

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

—Always say… He couldn’t do anything, eh?

With a nod, she replied. That was it. And, then, he persisted on the stage, he wanted to know her to the end, he went down to harsh words, to filthy questions. She no longer loosened her teeth, she continued to say yes, to say no, with a sign. Maybe it would relieve them both, when she confessed. But he suffered more from these details, which she believed to be an attenuation. Of normal relations, complete, reportedly haunted by a vision less agonizing. This debauchery rotted everything, sank and turned to the depths of his flesh the poisoned blades of his jealousy. Now it was over, he would no longer live, he would always evoke the execrable image.

A sob tore his throat.

—Ah! name of God… ah! name of God! … it can’t be, no, no! it’s too much, it can’t be!

Then all of a sudden he shook her.

—But goddamn bitch! why did you marry me? … Do you know that it is despicable to have deceived me thus? There are thieves in prison who don’t have so much on their conscience… So you despised me, didn’t you love me? … Huh! why did you marry me?

She made a vague gesture. Did she know exactly now? By marrying him, she was happy, hoping to end the other. There are so many things that we would not want to do and do, because they are still the wisest. No, she

didn’t love him; and what she avoided telling him was that without this story she would never women.

—He, isn’t he? wanted to settle down. He found a good beast… Huh? he wanted you to settle down so that it could continue. And you carried on, eh? on your two trips there. Is that why he was taking you?

With a sign, she confessed again.

“And that’s why he invited you again this time? … Until the end, then, that rubbish would have started again!” And, if I don’t strangle you, it will start again!

His convulsed hands reached out to grab her by the throat. But this time, she rebelled.

—Come on, you’re unfair. Since I was the one who refused to go. You sent me there, I must have got angry, remember… you see that I no longer wanted. It was finished. Never, never again, I would have wanted.

He felt that she was telling the truth, and he had no relief. The terrible pain, the iron that remained in her chest, it was irreparable, what had taken place between her and this man. He only suffered horribly from his inability to prevent it from happening. Without letting go of her again, he had come closer to her face, he seemed very ascended, drawn there, as if to find, in the blood of her little blue veins, everything she confessed to him. And he murmured, obsessed, hallucinated:-

To the Croix-de-Maufras, in the red room… I know her, the window overlooks the railway, the bed is opposite. And it’s there, in that room… I understand he’s talking about leaving you home. You won it well. He could watch over your money and endow you, it was worth it… A judge, a man rich in millions, so respected, so educated, so high! True, your head is spinning… And, what if he was your father?

Severine, with an effort, stood up. She had repulsed him, with extraordinary vigor, for his weakness as a poor vanquished man. Violent, she protested.

—No, no, not that! Anything you want, for the rest. Beat me, kill me… But don’t say that, you’re lying!

Roubaud had kept one hand in his.

—Do you know anything about it? It is because you doubt it yourself that it lifts you up like this.

And, as she freed her hand, he felt the ring, the little golden serpent with a ruby head, forgotten on his finger. He tore it off, pounding it with his heel on the floor, in a new fit of rage. Then he walked from one end of the room to the other, mute, bewildered. She, who had fallen seated on the edge of the bed, was looking at him with her large, fixed eyes. And the terrible silence lasted.

Roubaud's fury did not subside. As soon as it seemed to dissipate a little, it returned immediately, like drunkenness, in great redoubled waves, which carried it away in their vertigo. He no longer possessed himself, beat the void, thrown at all the swings of the wind of violence with which he was scourged, falling back to the sole need to appease the howling beast deep inside him. It was a physical, immediate need, like a hunger for revenge, which twisted his body and which would not give him any rest until he had satisfied it.

Without stopping, he slapped his temples with both fists, he stammered in a voice of anguish:

"What am I going to do?"

This woman, since he hadn't killed her right away, he wouldn't kill her now. His cowardice of letting her live exasperated his anger, for it was cowardly, it was because he still clung to her bitchy skin, that he hadn't strangled her. He couldn't keep her like that though. So he was going to chase her away, put her in the street, never to see her again? And a new wave of pain swept over him, horrible nausea washed over him, when he felt he wouldn't even do that. What, finally? It only remained to accept the abomination and bring this woman back to Le Havre, to continue the quiet life with her, as if nothing had happened. No! no! death rather, death for both of them, at the moment! Such distress lifted him up that he cried out, bewildered,

"What am I going to do?"

From the bed where she remained seated, Severine still followed him with her big eyes. In the calm comrade affection she had had for him, he already made her feel sorry for the inordinate pain in which she saw him. The swear words, the blows, she would have excused them, if this mad outburst had left her less of a surprise, a surprise from which she had not yet returned. She, passive, docile, who from a very young age had bowed to the wishes of an old man, who later let his marriage take place, simply

wishing to arrange things, could not understand such a burst of jealousy, for old faults, of which she repented; and, without vice, the poorly awakened flesh again, in her semi-unconsciousness of a gentle girl, chaste in spite of everything, she watched her husband, going, coming, turning furiously, as she would have looked at a wolf, a being of another species. What did he have in him? There were so many without anger! What terrified her was to feel the animal, suspected by her for three years, with muffled grunts, now unleashed, enraged, ready to bite. What to say to him, to prevent a misfortune?

Each time he returned, he found himself near the bed in front of her. And she was waiting for him in passing, she dared to speak to him.

—My friend, listen…

But he didn't hear it, he was going back to the other end of the coin, as well as a straw beaten by a thunderstorm.

—What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

Finally she grabbed his wrist, she held it back for a minute.

—My friend, let's see, since I was the one who refused to go… I would never have been there again, never, never! It is you that I love.

And she was caressing, pulling him in, lifting her lips to kiss them. But, falling close to her, he pushed her away with a movement of horror.

—Ah! bitch, you would like now… Earlier, you did not want, you did not want me… And now you would like to take me back, eh? When you hold a man by there, we hold it securely… But it would burn me, to go with you, yes! I can tell it would burn my blood from a poison.

He was shivering. The idea of possessing her, this image of their two bodies collapsing on the bed, had just crossed him with a flame. And, in the murky night of his flesh, in the depths of his bloody defiled desire, suddenly arose the necessity of death.

"So that I don't die going with you again, you see, before that I have to die the other… I must die, that I die!"

His voice rose, he repeated the word, standing tall, as if this word, by bringing him a resolution, had calmed him. He did not speak moreover, he walked slowly to the table, looked there at the knife, the blade of which, wide open, shone. With a mechanical gesture, he closed it, put it in his pocket. And, his hands dangling, his gazes far away, he remained in the same place, he thought. Some obstacles were cutting his forehead two large

wrinkles. To find, he returned to open the window, he planted himself there, his face in the small cold air of twilight. Behind him, his wife had risen, resumed with fear; and, not daring to question him, trying to guess what was going on in the depths of that hard skull, she waited, also standing, facing the broad sky.

Under the beginning of the night, the distant houses stood out in black, the vast field of the station was filled with a purple haze. On the Batignolles side especially, the deep trench was as if drowned in ash, where the frameworks of the Pont de l'Europe were beginning to fade. Towards Paris, a last glint of day paled the windows of the large covered market halls, while, below, the amassed darkness rained down. Sparks shone, the gas lamps were lit along the quays. A big white light was there, the lantern of the machine of the Dieppe train, crowded with travelers, the oors already closed, and who was waiting to leave for the order of the deputy head of the department. Embarrassments had occurred, the red signal from the switchman closed the way, while a small machine came to pick up cars, which a badly executed maneuver had left running. Without ceasing, trains sped in the increasing shadows, among the inextricable web of rails, in the middle of the lines of motionless wagons, parked on the waiting tracks. One left for Argenteuil, another for Saint-Germain; there came a Cherbourg, very long. The signals multiplied, the whistles, the sounds of the horn; On all sides, one by one, lights appeared, red, green, yellow, white; it was a confusion, at this cloudy hour between dog and wolf, and it seemed that everything was going to break, and everything was passing, brushed against each other, freed himself, with the same gentle, creeping movement, vague in the depths of the twilight. But the red light from the switchman faded, the Dieppe train whistled and started to move. From the pale sky, rare drops of rain began to fly. The night was going to be very humid.

When Roubaud turned around, his face was thick and stubborn, as if invaded by shadow by this falling night. He was decided, his plan was done. "In the dying day, he looked at the time on the cuckoo clock," he said aloud:

Five twenty.

And he was amazed: an hour, barely an hour, for so many things! He would have thought the two had been devouring each other there for weeks.

—Five twenty, we have time.

Severine, who did not dare to question him, always followed him with her anxious looks. She saw him poking around in the cupboard, pulling out some paper, a small bottle of ink, a quill.

—Here! you will write.

—To whom?

—To him… Sit down.

And, as she instinctively moved away from the chair, without knowing yet what he was going to demand, he brought her back and sat her down in front of the table, weighing so heavily that she remained there.

—Write… “Leave this evening by the six-thirty express and show yourself only to Rouen.”

She held the quill, but her hand was shaking, her fear increased from all the unknown, two single lines. So she emboldened to raise her head, pleading.

“My friend, what are you going to do? … Please explain to me…”

He repeated, in his loud, inexorable voice:

“Write, write.”

Then, her eyes in hers, without anger, without swearing, but with an obstinacy whose weight she felt crushing her, destroying her:-

What I’m going to do, you’ll see…—you, what I’m going to do, I want you to do it with me… That way, we’ll stay together, there will be something solid between us.

He terrified her, she stepped back again.

—Non, non, je veux savoir… Je n’écrirai pas avant de savoir.

So, ceasing to speak, he took her hand, a small hand frail of a child, clasped it in his iron fist, with a continuous pressure of vice, until crushing it. It was his will that he entered her flesh thus, with pain. She gave a cry, and everything was shattering inside her, everything was giving way. The ignorant she had remained, in her passive gentleness, could only obey. Instrument of love, instrument of death.

—Write, write.

And she wrote, with her poor painful hand, painfully.

“It’s good, you’re nice,” he said, when he got the letter. At present, range a little here, all ready… I will return you take.

He was very calm. He tied the knot of his tie in front of the ice, put on his hat, then left. She heard him double closing the door and taking the key.

The night grew more and more. For a moment she remained seated, her ears strained to hear all the noises outside. At the neighbor’s, the newspaper seller, there was a continuous, muffled moan: no doubt a forgotten little dog. Downstairs, at the Dauvergne’s, the piano was silent. It was now a cheerful din of pots and dishes, the two housewives busy in the back of their kitchen, Claire tending a mutton stew, Sophie peeling a salad. And she, devastated, listened to them laugh, in the terrible distress of this falling night.

At a quarter past six, the machine of the Havre express, emerging from the Pont de l’Europe, was sent on its train, and harnessed. Due to congestion, we could not accommodate this train under the marquee of the main lines. He was waiting in the open air, against the quay which extended into a sort of narrow jetty, in the darkness of an inky sky, where the line of a few gas lamps, planted along the sidewalk, aligned only smoky stars. A downpour had just stopped, there was still a breath of icy humidity, spread by this vast open space, which a mist receded until the small pale lights of the facades of the rue de Rome. It was huge and sad, and there stung by a bloody fire, confusedly peopled with opaque masses, solitary machines and wagons, sections of trains sleeping on the sidings; and, from the bottom of this shadowy lake, noises came, giant breaths, panting with fever, whistles like the shrill cries of women being violated, distant horns sounding, lamentable, in the midst of the rumbling neighboring streets. There were loud orders for a car to be added. Motionless, the express machine lost through a valve a great jet of steam which rose in all this darkness, where it unraveled in small fumes, sowing white tears over it. boundless mourning stretched to heaven.

At twenty past six Roubaud and Séverine appeared. She had just returned the key to Mother Victoire, passing in front of the toilets, near the waiting rooms; and he pushed her forward, with the hurried air of a husband whose wife is lingering, he impatient and abrupt, her hat back, her veil tightened to her face, hesitant, as if broken with fatigue. A flood of travelers followed the platform, they mingled with it, walked along the line of wagons, looking for an empty first-class compartment. The sidewalk came to life, postmen were rolling the luggage carts in the lead van, a supervisor was busy putting in a With a large family, the deputy head of the service looked at the teams, his signal lantern in his hand, to see if they were well

made, tightly packed. And Roubaud had finally found an empty compartment, in which he was going to bring Séverine up, when he was seen by the station master, Mr. Vandorpe, who was walking there, in the company of his deputy head of main lines, Mr. Dauvergne., both hands behind their backs, depending on the maneuver, for the car being added. There were greetings, we had to stop and talk.

First, we talked about this story of the sub-prefect, which had ended to everyone’s satisfaction. Then it was question of an accident which happened in the morning at Le Havre, and which the telegraph had transmitted: a machine, the Lison, which, on Thursdays and Saturdays, was on the service of the six-thirty express, had had its connecting rod broken, just as the train entered the station; and the repair was to immobilize there, for two days, the mechanic, Jacques Lantier, a country of Roubaud, and his driver, Pecqueux, mother Victoire’s man. Standing in front of the compartment door, Séverine waited, without going up yet; while her husband affected a great freedom of mind with these gentlemen, raising his voice, laughing. But there was a shock, the train backed up a few meters: it was the machine which drove back the first wagons on the one we had just added, the 293, to have a reserved coupe. And the Dauvergne son, Henri, who accompanied the train as head conductor, having recognized Séverine under her veil, had prevented her from being hit by the wide open door, by pushing her aside with a prompt gesture; then, apologizing, smiling, very kind, he explained to her that the coupe was for one of the directors of the Company, who had just requested it, half an hour before the train left. She gave a nervous little laugh, without cause, and he ran to her service, he left her delighted, for he had often said to himself that

The clock marked six twenty-seven. Three more minutes. Suddenly Roubaud, who was watching the doors of the waiting rooms in the distance, while chatting with the station master, left him, to come back to Séverine. But the car had walked, they had to join the empty compartment a few paces away; and, turning his back, he jostled his wife, he made her come up with an effort of the wrist, while, in her anxious docility, she looked instinctively back to find out. It was a retarded traveler who arrived with only a blanket in his hand, the collar of his big blue overcoat pulled up and so ample, the brim of his round hat so low over the eyebrows that one the face, with the flickering light of the gas, could only distinguish a little white

beard. Yet M. Vandorpe and M. Dauvergne had stepped forward, despite the traveler's obvious desire not to be seen. They followed him, he did not salute them until three wagons later, in front of the reserved coupe, where he got on in haste. It was him. Séverine, trembling, had dropped onto the bench. Her husband was crushing her arm with a hug, like a last possession, exultantly, now that he was sure he was doing the thing.

In a minute, half would strike. A merchant persisted in offering the evening papers, travelers were still walking on the platform, finishing a cigarette. But they all got in: you could hear the supervisors coming from both ends of the train closing the doors. And Roubaud, who had had the unpleasant surprise to see, in this compartment which he believed to be empty, a dark form occupying a corner, a woman in mourning, no doubt, mute, motionless, could not restrain an exclamation of real anger, when the door was reopened and a supervisor threw a couple, a fat man, a fat woman, who ran aground, suffocating. We were going to leave. The rain, very fine, had resumed, drowning the vast dark field, which trains constantly crossed, of which only the windows could be distinguished. illuminated, a line of small moving windows. Green lights had come on, a few lanterns danced low to the ground. And nothing else, nothing but a black immensity, where only the marquees of the main lines appeared, pale with a faint reflection of gas. Everything had sunk, the noises themselves were muffled, there was only the thunder of the machine, opening its traps, releasing swirling waves of white vapor. A cloud rose, unwinding like a shroud of apparition, and in which passed great black smoke, coming from no one knew where. The sky was further darkened, a cloud of soot flew over nocturnal Paris,

Then the deputy head of the service raised his lantern, so that the mechanic could ask for the way. There were two whistles, and over there, near the switchman's post, the red light faded, was replaced by a white light. Standing at the door of the van, the head driver awaited the order to leave, which he transmitted. The mechanic whistled again, for a long time, opened his regulator, starting the machine. We were leaving. At first the movement was insensible, then the train rolled. He sped under the Pont de l'Europe, plunged towards the Batignolles tunnel. All you could see of him, bleeding like open wounds, was the three rear lights, the red triangle. A few more seconds, we could follow him, in the black chill of the night. Now he was on the run, and nothing could stop this rushing train. He disappeared.

II

At La Croix-de-Maufras, in a garden cut off by the railway, the house sits at an angle, so close to the track that all the passing trains shake it; and one trip is enough to carry her away in her memory, the whole world going at high speed knows her in this place, without knowing anything about her, always closed, left as if in distress, with her gray shutters greened by the rain from West. It is the desert, it seems to further increase the solitude of this lost corner, which a league around separates from all souls.

Only the house of the gatekeeper is there, at the corner of the road which crosses the line and which goes to Doinville, five kilometers away. Low, the walls cracked, the roof tiles eaten with moss, it crashes with an abandoned poor air, in the middle of the garden which surrounds it, a garden planted with vegetables, closed by a living hedge, and in which stands a large well, as high as the house. The level crossing is located between the stations of Malaunay and Barentin, right in the middle, four kilometers from each. It is also very little frequented, the old half-rotten barrier hardly rolls except for the dumpsters of the Bécourt quarries, in the forest, at a half a league. One could not imagine a more remote hole, more separated from the living, because the long tunnel, on the Malaunay side, cuts all roads, and one communicates with Barentin only by a poorly maintained path along the line. So visitors are rare.

That evening, at nightfall, in very mild gray weather, a traveler, who had just left a train from Le Havre at Barentin, was following the Croix-de-Maufras path with a long step. The country is nothing but an uninterrupted series of valleys and coasts, a sort of mottling of the ground, which the railway crosses, alternately, on embankments and in trenches. To the two sides of the road, these continual irregularities in the terrain, the climbs and the descents, make the roads difficult. The feeling of great loneliness is increased; the grounds, thin, whitish, remain uncultivated; trees crown the hillocks of small woods, while, along the narrow valleys, streams flow, shaded by willows. Other chalky bumps are absolutely bare, the hills follow

one another, sterile, in silence and deathly abandonment. And the traveler, young, vigorous, hastened his pace, as if to escape the sadness of this twilight so sweet on this desolate land.

In the gatekeeper’s garden, a girl was drawing water from the well, a tall girl of eighteen, blonde, strong, with a thick mouth, large green eyes, a low forehead, under heavy hair. She was not pretty, she had the solid hips and hard arms of a boy. As soon as she saw the traveler going down the path, she let go of the bucket, she ran to stand in front of the slatted door, which closed the hedge.

—Here! Jacques! she cried.

He had raised his head. He had just turned twenty-six, also tall, very dark, a handsome boy with a round and regular face, but spoiled by too strong jaws. His hair, planted thick, curled, as well as his mustache, if thick, so black that they increased the paleness of her complexion. He looked like a gentleman, with his thin skin, well shaved on his cheeks, if we had not also found the indelible imprint of the trade, the grease which already yellowed his mechanic’s hands, hands nevertheless remained small and flexible.

“Good evening, Flore,” he said simply.

But his eyes, which he had large and black, strewn with points of gold, were as though clouded with a reddish smoke, which made them pale. The eyelids fluttered, the eyes turned away, in a sudden embarrassment, an uneasiness going to the point of suffering. And the whole body itself had instinctively recoiled.

She, motionless, her eyes fixed on him, had noticed this involuntary start, which he tried to control every time he approached a woman. She seemed to remain very serious and sad about it. Then, eager to hide his embarrassment, as he asked her if his mother was at home, although he knew she was in pain, unable to go out, she only answered with a nod, she stepped aside to ask. that he could enter without touching her, and returned to the well without a word, his waist erect and proud.

Jacques, with his rapid step, crossed the narrow garden and entered the house. There, in the middle of the first room, a large kitchen where we ate and lived, Aunt Phasie, as he called her since childhood, was alone, sitting by the table, on a straw chair, her legs wrapped in an old shawl. It was a cousin of his father, a Lantier, who had served as his godmother, and who,

at the age of six, took him into her home, when, his father and mother disappeared, flew to Paris, he had stayed in Plassans, where he later attended the arts and crafts school. He was grateful to her for that, he said that it was to her that he owed it, if he had made his way. When he became a first class engineer in the West Company, Having passed through the Orleans railway, he had found his godmother there, remarried to a gatekeeper named Misard, exiled with the two daughters of his first marriage, in this remote hole of Croix-de-Maufras. Today, although barely forty-five years old, the beautiful aunt Phasie of yesteryear, so tall, so strong, appeared sixty, emaciated and yellowed, shaken by continual shivers.

She gave a cry of joy.

—How, it's you, Jacques! … Ah! my big boy, what a surprise!

He kissed her on the cheeks, he explained to her that he had suddenly had two days of forced leave: the Lison, his machine, on arriving in Le Havre in the morning, had had his rod broken, the repair could not be completed before twenty-four hours, he would not resume his service until the following evening, for the express at six forty. So he wanted to kiss her. He would go to bed, he would only leave Barentin by the seven-twenty-six in the morning train. And he kept his poor melted hands in his, he told her how his last letter had worried him.

—Ah! yes, my boy, it's not going, it's not going at all… How nice you are to have guessed my desire to see you! But I know how much you are held, I dared not ask you to come. Finally, here you are, and I'm so big, so big on my heart!

She paused, to glance fearfully out the window. As the day dawned, on the other side of the track, her husband, Misard, could be seen in a cantonment post, one of those plank huts, established every five or six kilometers and connected by telegraph devices, in order to ensure the good circulation of trains. While his wife, and later Flore, was in charge of the level crossing barrier, Misard was made stationary.

As if he could have heard it, she lowered her voice, with a shiver.

—I believe he poisons me!

Jacques jumped in surprise at this confidence, and his Their eyes, too, as they turned to the window, were again tarnished by this singular

disturbance, this little reddish smoke which paled its black brilliance, diamonds of gold.

—Oh! Aunt Phasie, what an idea! he whispered. He looks so sweet and so weak.

A train going to Le Havre had just passed, and Misard had left his post, to close the track behind him. As he raised the lever, turning the signal red, Jacques was looking at him. A thin little man, with sparse, discolored hair and beard, a hollow, poor face. With that, silent, self-effacing, without anger, obsequiously politely in front of the chiefs. But he had returned to the cabin of boards, to write the time of passage on his timepiece, and to push the two electric buttons, one which cleared the way at the previous station, the other which announced the train to the next station.

—Ah! you don’t know him, Aunt Phasie said. I tell you that he must make me take some dirt… I who was so strong, who would have eaten it, and it is he, this little man, this nothing at all, who eats me!

She was feverish with a dull and fearful resentment, she emptied her heart, delighted to finally hold someone who was listening to her. Where had she had the head to remarry with such a sneaky, and penniless, and stingy, she aged five years, having two girls, one six years old, the other eight already? It was soon ten years since she had done this fine trick, and not an hour had passed without her having repented of it: an existence of misery, an exile in that frozen corner of the North, where she was shivering, a boredom to perish, never having anyone to talk to, not even a neighbor. He was a former track installer, who now earned twelve hundred francs as a stationary; she, from the start, had had fifty francs for the barrier, with which Flore now found herself responsible; and there were the present and the future, no other hope, the certainty of living and dying in this hole, a thousand leagues from the living. What she did not tell were the consolations she still had, before she fell ill, when her husband worked on the ballast, and when she was left alone to guard the barrier with her daughters; for she possessed then, from Rouen to Havre, all along the line, such a reputation as a beautiful woman that the track inspectors visited her on the way; even there had been rivalries, the pickers of another service were still on tour, to redouble their surveillance. The husband was not a nuisance, deferential to everyone, slipping through the doors, leaving, coming back without seeing anything. But those distractions had ceased,

and she stayed there, weeks, month, on this chair, in this solitude, to feel his body go a little more, hour by hour.

“I tell you,” she repeated to conclude, “that it is he who has come after me, and that he will finish me off, small as he is.”

A sudden ringing made him cast the same worried look outside. It was the previous station which announced to Misard a train going to Paris; and the needle of the cantonment apparatus, placed in front of the window, had tilted in the direction of the direction. He stopped the bell, he went out to signal the train with two trumpet sounds. Flore, at that moment, came to push the barrier; then she planted herself, holding the flag, in its leather sheath. The train, an express, hidden by a curve, was heard approaching with a growing rumble. It passed like a thunderbolt, shaking, threatening to wash away the low house, in the midst of a stormy wind. Flore was already going back to her vegetables, while Misard, after closing the upward track behind the train, was about to reopen the downward track, pulling down the lever to erase the red signal; for a new bell, accompanied by the raising of the other hand, had just informed him that the train, which had passed five minutes earlier, had passed the next post. He returned, informed the two stations, entered the passage, then waited. Always the same, which he did for twelve hours, living there, eating there, without reading three lines of a newspaper, without even appearing to have a thought, under his slanted skull.

Jacques, who used to joke his godmother about the havoc she was making among track inspectors, could not help smiling, saying:

“Maybe he’s jealous.”

But Phasie gave a pitying shrug, as a laugh also mounted, irresistible, in her poor pale eyes.

—Ah! my boy, what are you saying? … Him, jealous! He always didn’t care,

Then, resuming his shudder:-

No, no, he didn’t care much about that. He only cares about the money… What made us angry, you see, is that I did not want to give him Daddy’s thousand francs last year, when I inherited. So, as he threatened me with, it brought me bad luck, I fell ill… And evil has never left me since that time, yes! Just since that time.

The young man understood, and as he believed in the dark thoughts of a suffering woman, he again tried to dissuade her. But she persisted with a shake of the head, in person whose conviction is made. So he ended up saying:-

Well, nothing is simpler, finish… Give him your thousand francs.

An extraordinary effort brought her to her feet. And, resuscitated, violent:-

My thousand francs, never! I prefer to die… Ah! they are hidden, well hidden, go! We can return the house, I defy that we find them… And he has turned it enough, him, the smart one! I heard it, at night, banging on every wall. Seek, seek! Nothing but the pleasure of seeing his nose lengthen, that would be enough for me to be patient… It will be necessary to know who will let go first, him or me. I am suspicious, I don't swallow anything he touches. And if I slammed, well, he wouldn't have them all the same, my thousand francs! I would rather leave them to the ground.

She fell back on the chair, exhausted, shaken by another sound of the trunk. It was Misard, on the threshold of the cantonment post, which this time signaled a train going to Le Havre. Despite the obstinacy in which she shut herself up, not to give the inheritance, she had a secret, growing fear of him, the fear of the colossus in front of the insect which he feels himself eaten. And the train announced, the omnibus leaving Paris at forty-five twelve, was coming in the distance, with a dull rolling. He was heard coming out of the tunnel, blowing higher into the countryside. Then it passed, in the thunder of its wheels and the mass of its wagons, with the invincible force of a hurricane.

Jacques, his eyes raised towards the window, had watched the small square panes scroll past, in which the profiles of travelers appeared. He wanted to deflect Phasie's dark thoughts, he went on jokingly:-

Godmother, you complain about never seeing a cat in your hole… But here are people!

She did not understand at first, surprised.

—Where in the world? … Ah! yes, those people passing by. The great advance! we don't know them, we can't talk.

He continued to laugh.

—I, you know me well, you see me pass often.

“You, it’s true, I know you, and I know the time of your train, and I’m watching you, on your machine. Only you spin, you files! Yesterday, you did like that with your hand. I just can’t answer… No, no, that’s not a way of seeing the world.

However, this idea of the flood of crowds which the rising and descending trains carried daily before her, in the midst of the great silence of her solitude, left her pensive, her eyes on the track, where night was falling. When she was able-bodied, when she came and went, planting herself in front of the barrier, the flag in her hand, she never thought of these things. But confused reveries, hardly formulated, confused her head, since she remained the days on this chair, having to think of nothing but her secret struggle with her man. It seemed funny to her, to live lost in the depths of this desert, without a soul to confide in, when, day and night, continually, so many men and women marched past, in the storm of the trains, shaking the house, fleeing at full steam. Of course the whole earth passed there, not only French people, foreigners too, people from the most distant lands, since no one now could stay at home, and all the peoples, as they said, would not do. soon more than one. That was progress, all brothers, all together, over there, towards a country of plenty. She tried to count them, on average, at so much per car: there were too many of them, she couldn’t do it. Often she thought she recognized faces, that of a gentleman with a blond beard, an Englishman no doubt, who made the trip to Paris every week, that of a little dark-haired lady, passing regularly on Wednesdays and Saturdays. But the lightning was sweeping them away, she was not sure she had seen them, all the faces were drowned, mingled, as if similar, disappearing into each other. The torrent flowed, leaving nothing of it. And what made her sad was, under this continuous bearing, under so much well-being and so much of money, to feel that this crowd, always so panting, did not know that it was there, in danger of death, to the point that, if her man finished her one evening, the trains would continue to pass each other near his corpse, without even suspecting the crime, in the back of the lonely house.

Phasie had remained staring out the window, and she summed up what she was feeling too vaguely to explain throughout.

—Ah! it is a beautiful invention, there is nothing to say. We go fast, we are more knowledgeable… But wild beasts remain wild beasts, and we can

invent even better mechanics, there will still be wild beasts underneath.

Jacques nodded again, to say that he thought like her. For a moment he had been looking at Flore, who was reopening the barrier, in front of a quarryman's car loaded with two huge blocks of stone. The road served only the quarries of Becourt, so that at night, the barrier was padlocked, and it was very rare that the young girl was raised. In seeing this talking familiarly with the carrier, a small dark young man, he cried

—Tiens! Cabuche is ill, then, that his cousin Louis drives his horses? … Poor Cabuche, do you see him often, godmother?

She raised her hands, without responding, heaving a heavy sigh. It was quite a tragedy, last fall, which had not been done to put her back on: her daughter Louisette, the youngest, placed as a chambermaid with Madame Bonnehon, in Doinville, had fled one evening, distraught, bruised, to go and die with her good friend Cabuche, in the house he lived in in the middle of the forest. Stories had been circulating which accused President Grandmorin of violence; but we dared not repeat them aloud. The mother herself, although she knew what to expect, did not like to return to this subject. However, she ended by saying:

"No, he doesn't come in anymore, he's becoming a real wolf… Poor Louisette, who was so cute, so white, so sweet!" liked me, she would have taken care of me! while Flore, my God! I'm not complaining, but she sure has something disturbed, always to do as she pleases, disappeared for hours, and proud, and violent! … all that is sad, well sad.

Listening, Jacques continued to follow the dumpster with his eyes, which was now crossing the track. But the wheels got stuck in the rails, the driver had to crack his whip, while Flore herself shouted, exciting the horses.

—File! declared the young man, a train should not arrive… There would be one, marmalade!

—Oh! no danger, Aunt Phasie said. Flore is funny sometimes, but she knows her stuff, she keeps an eye out… Thank God, we haven't had an accident for five years. Once a man was cut off. The rest of us have only had one cow, which almost derailed a train. Ah! the poor beast! we found the body here and the head over there, near the tunnel… With Flore, we can sleep soundly.

The dumpster had passed, you could hear the deep shaking of the wheels in the ruts moving away. So she returned to her constant preoccupation, to the idea of health, in others as well as in her own.

—And you, is it all right now? Do you remember, with us, the things from which you suffered, and which the doctor did not understand?

He glanced worriedly.

—I am very well, godmother.

—True! everything has disappeared, that pain that pierced your skull behind your ears, and the sudden bouts of fever, and those fits of sadness that made you hide like an animal, at the bottom of a hole?

As she spoke, he became more disturbed, seized with such uneasiness that he ended up interrupting her in a short voice.

—I assure you that I am very well… I have nothing more, nothing at all.

“Come on, so much the better, my boy! … It is not because you would have trouble that it would cure mine.” And then, it’s your age to be healthy. Ah! health, there is nothing so good… You are all the same very kind to have come to see me, when you could have gone to have fun elsewhere. Is not it? you are going to dine with us, and you will sleep up there in the attic, next to Flore’s room.

But, once again, the sound of a trunk cut him short. The night had fallen, and both turned to the window, no more than vaguely distinguished Misard talking to a different person. Six o’clock had just struck, he was putting the service to his replacement, the night stationary. He was going to be free at last, after his twelve hours spent in this hut, furnished only with a small table, under the shelf of the appliances, a stool and a stove, the excessively heat of which obliged him to keep almost constantly with the door open.

—Ah! Here he is, he is going home, Aunt Phasie murmured, her fear regained.

The announced train was arriving, very heavy, very long, with its growl louder and louder. And the young man had to bend down to make himself heard by the patient, moved by the miserable state in which he saw her put, eager to relieve her.

—Listen, godmother, if he has really bad ideas, maybe it would stop him, to know that I was getting involved… You would do well to entrust me with your thousand francs.

She had one last revolt.

—My thousand francs! no more to you than to him! … I tell you that I prefer to die!

At this moment, the train passed, in its stormy violence, as if it had swept everything in front of it. The house shook, enveloped in a gust of wind. This train, which was going to Le Havre, was very busy, because there was a party for the next day, Sunday, the launch of a ship. Despite the speed, through the lighted windows of the doors, we had seen the full compartments, the rows of heads lined up, tight, each with its own profile. They followed one another, disappeared. So many people! again the crowd, the endless crowd, in the midst of the rolling of wagons, the whistling of machines, the tolling of the telegraph, the ringing of bells! It was like a big body, a giant being lying across the earth, the head in Paris, the vertebrae all along the line, the limbs widening with the branches, the feet and the hands in Le Havre and in the other arrival cities. And it passed, it passed, mechanical, triumphant, going to the future with mechanical rectitude, in willful ignorance of what was left of man, on both sides, hidden and still alive, the eternal passion and the eternal crime.

It was Flore who came home first. She lit the lamp, a small kerosene lamp, without a shade, and set the table. Not a word was exchanged, she barely glanced at Jacques, who was turning away, standing in front of the window. On the stove, cabbage soup stood hot. She was serving her when Misard appeared in her turn. He was not surprised to find the young man there. Perhaps he had seen it coming, but he didn’t question it, without curiosity. A hand shake, three short words, nothing more. Jacques had to repeat, on his own, the story of the broken rod, his idea of coming kiss her godmother and go to bed. Slowly, Misard was content to shake his head, as if he found it very good, and we sat down, we ate without haste, first in silence. Phasie, who had not taken her eyes off the pot in which the cabbage soup was boiling since morning, accepted a plate. But her man having got up to give her her iron water, forgotten by Flore, a decanter in which nails were dipped, she did not touch it. He, humble, puny, coughing with a nasty little cough, did not seem to notice the anxious looks with which she followed his every movement. As she asked for salt, which was not on the table, he told her that would regret eating so much, that was what made her sick; and he got up to take some, brought a pinch of it in a spoon, which she accepted without suspicion, the salt purifying everything, she said. So we

talked about the really lukewarm weather it had been doing for a few days, about a derailment that had occurred in Maromme. Jacques ended up believing that his godmother had wide awake nightmares, because he surprised nothing in this end of man so obliging, with vague eyes. We lingered for over an hour. Twice, at the sound of the horn, Flore had disappeared for a moment. Trains passed, shaking glasses on the table; but none of the guests there was even careful.

A new sound of trunk was heard, and this time Flore, who had just removed the cover, did not reappear. She left her mother and the two men seated in front of a bottle of cider brandy. All three stayed there for another half hour. Then Misard, who for a moment had stopped his searching eyes on a corner of the room, took his cap and left, with a simple good evening. He poached in the nearby little streams, where there were superb eels, and he never lay down without visiting his bottom lines.

As soon as he was no longer there, Phasie stared at his godson.

—Hey, do you think so? Did you see him looking around over there, in that corner? … The idea occurred to him that I could have hidden my nest egg behind the butter pot… Ah! I know him, I'm sure he'll go and disturb the pot tonight to see.

But sweating took hold of her, a tremor stirred her limbs.

—Look, that's it again, go! He will have drugged me, my mouth is bitter as if I had swallowed old coins. God knows, however, if I took anything from his hand! It is to slip away… Tonight, I can't take it anymore, I had better go to bed. So, goodbye, my boy, because if you leave at seven twenty-six, it will be too early for me. And come back, don't you? and hope that I will always be there.

He had to help her into the bedroom, where she lay down and fell asleep, overwhelmed. Left alone, he hesitated, wondering if he shouldn't go up and lie down, too, on the hay that was waiting for him in the attic. But it was only ten to eight, he had time to sleep. And he went out in his turn, letting the little kerosene lamp burn, in the empty, sleepy house, shaken from time to time by the sudden thunder of a train.

Outside, Jacques was surprised at the softness of the air. No doubt it was going to rain again. In the sky, a uniform milky cloud had spread, and the full moon, not, drowned behind, lit the whole vault with a reddish reflection. So he clearly distinguished the countryside, whose lands around

him, the hillsides, the trees stood out in black, under that even and dead light, with a nightlight peace. He walked around the small vegetable patch. Then he thought of walking in the direction of Doinville, the road going up less steeply. But the sight of the lonely house, planted sideways at the other end of the line, having attracted him, he crossed the way through the gate, for the barrier was already closed for the night. This house, he knew it well, he looked at it on each of his trips, in the growling movement of his machine. She haunted him without knowing why, with the confused feeling that it mattered to his existence. Each time, he felt, first as a fear of not finding her there any more, then as an uneasy feeling that she was still there. He had never seen the doors or the windows open. All she had been taught about her was that she belonged to President Grandmorin; and, that evening, an overwhelming desire seized him to turn around, to know more.

Jacques stood for a long time on the road, opposite the gate. He drew back, stood up, trying to realize. The railway, by cutting the garden, had moreover left in front of the steps only a narrow parterre, enclosed by walls; while behind it stretched a fairly large piece of land, surrounded simply by a hedge. The house was mournfully sad, in its distress, under the red reflection of that smoky night; and he was about to walk away, with a shiver on his skin, when he noticed a hole in the hedge. The idea that it would be cowardly not to enter, made him go through the hole. His heart was beating. But immediately, as he walked past a small ruined greenhouse, the sight of a shadow, crouching at the door, stopped him.

—How is it you? he cried astonished, recognizing Flore. That

She too had had a jolt of surprise. Then, quietly:-

You see, I’m taking ropes… They left a pile of ropes there which are rotting, without being useful to anyone. So, me, as I always need it, I come to take it.

In fact, with a pair of strong scissors in her hand, sitting on the ground, she untangled the ends of the rope, cut the knots when they resisted.

—So the owner doesn’t come any more? asked the young man.

She laughed.

—Oh! since the Louisette affair, there is no danger of the president risking the tip of his nose at the Croix-de-Maufras. Go, I can take his ropes.

He was silent for a moment, looking troubled by the memory of the tragic adventure she was evoking.

“And you, do you believe what Louisette said, do you think he wanted to have it, and that it was while struggling that she was injured?”

Stopping laughing, suddenly violent, she cried:

“Louisette has never lied, nor Cabuche either… He’s my friend, Cabuche.”

—Your lover perhaps, at this hour?

—Him! ah well, it would be necessary to be a famous cateau! … No, no! he is my friend, I have no lovers! I do n’t want to have any.

She had raised her powerful head, whose thick blond fleece curled very low on the forehead; and, supple, a wild energy of will arose. Already a legend was forming on her, in the country. They told stories, rescues: a cart pulled out of a jolt, the passage of a train; a wagon, which was descending the Barentin slope by itself, stopped like a furious beast, galloping to meet an express. And these proofs of strength astonished, made her desire men, all the more since we had thought her easy at first, always to beat the fields as soon as she was free, looking for lost corners, lying down at the bottom. holes, eyes in the air, silent, motionless. But the first ones who had risked themselves had not wanted to start over. adventure. As she liked to bathe for hours, naked in a nearby stream, kids her age had gone to play the game of watching her; and she had grabbed one, without even bothering to put on her shirt, and she had arranged it so well that no one was watching her anymore. Finally, rumor spread of her story with a switchman at the Dieppe branch, at the other end of the tunnel: a man named Ozil, a very honest boy in his thirties, whom she seemed to have encouraged. for a moment, and who, having tried to take her, imagining herself one evening that she was giving herself up, had almost been killed by her with a blow of a stick. She was a virgin and a warrior, dismissive of the male, which ended up convincing people that she was sure her head was deranged.

Hearing her declare that she did not want a lover, Jacques continued to joke.

—So, is your marriage to Ozil wrong? I was told that, every day, you went to join him by the tunnel.

She shrugged her shoulders.

—Ah! ouitche! my wedding… it amuses me, the tunnel. Galloping two and a half kilometers in the dark, with the idea that you can be cut off by a

train if you don’t open your eyes. You have to hear them, the trains, snore under there! … But he annoyed me, Ozil. This is not the one I want yet.

—Ah! I don’t know… Ah! my faith, no!

A laugh had taken hold of her, while a touch of embarrassment made her get back to a knot in the ropes, which she could not overcome. Then, without raising her head, as if very absorbed in her work:-

And you, you have none, lover? Jacques in turn became serious again. His eyes looked away, flickered as they stared into the distance into the night. He replied in a short voice:-

No.

“That’s it,” she continued, “I have been told that you abominated women. And then, it’s not yesterday that I know you, you would never send us something kind… Why, say?”

He was silent, she decided to let go of the knot and look at him.

“Do you only love your machine? We’re kidding, you know. They say that you are always rubbing it, making it shine, as if you only had caresses for it… I tell you that, because I am your friend.

He, too, was now looking at her, in the pale light of the hazy sky. And he remembered her, when she was little, violent and strong-willed already, but hugging him as soon as he arrived, seized with the passion of a wild girl. Then, having often lost sight of her, he had found her grown up each time, welcoming her with the same leap to his shoulders, embarrassing him to more and more by the flame of his big clear eyes. At this hour, she was a woman, superb, desirable, and she undoubtedly loved him, from afar, from the very depths of her youth. His heart began to beat, he suddenly had the feeling that he was the one she was waiting for. A great disturbance rose to his skull with the blood of his veins, his first impulse was to flee, in the anguish which invaded him. Desire had always driven him mad, he saw red.

—What are you doing here, standing? she continued. Sit down !

Again he hesitated. Then, his legs suddenly very tired, overcome by the need to try love again, he dropped beside her, onto the pile of ropes. He was no longer speaking, his throat dry. It was she, now, the proud, the silent one, chatting breathlessly, very cheerful, stunning herself.

—You see, mamma’s mistake was to marry Misard. It’ll play a trick on him… I don’t care, because we’ve had enough of our stuff, haven’t we? And then, mom sends me to bed, as soon as I want to intervene… So, let

her manage! I live outside. I'm thinking of things for later… Ah! you know, I saw you pass, this morning, on your machine, here! of that brush over there where I was sitting. But you, you never look… to you, the things that I think of, but not now, later, when we're quite good friends.

She had let the scissors slip, and he, still silent, had taken hold of both hands. Delighted, she abandoned them to him. However, when he brought them to his burning lips, she gave a start in the terror of a virgin. The warrior awoke, prancing, pugnacious, at this first approach of the male.

—No no! leave me, I don't want to… Keep quiet, we'll talk… that's all you think of, men. Ah! if I repeated to you what Louisette told me, the day she died, at Cabuche's… Besides, I already knew about the president, because I had seen filth here, when he came with young girls… He has one that no one suspects, one that he married…

He did not listen to him, did not hear him. He had grabbed her in a brutal embrace, and he crushed his mouth to hers. She gave a slight cry, a complaint rather, so deep, so sweet, in which the confession of her long hidden tenderness burst forth. But she still struggled, refused herself anyway, by a fighting instinct. She wanted him and she was arguing with him, with the need to be conquered. Without a word, chest to chest, both were out of breath who could knock the other down. A moment, she seemed to have to be the strongest, she might have thrown him under her, he was so annoyed, if he hadn't grabbed her by the throat. The bodice was torn off, both breasts burst out, hard and swollen with battle, milky white in the light shade. And she fell on her back, she gave herself, defeated.

Then he, panting, stopped, looked at her, instead of possessing her. A fury seemed to seize him, a ferocity that made him look around him for a weapon, a stone, something in short to kill her. Her eyes met the scissors, glistening among the ends of the rope; and he picked them up from a leap, and he would have thrust them into that bare throat, between the two white breasts, with pink flowers. But a great cold sobered him up, he rejected them, he fled, bewildered; while she, with her eyelids closed, believed he was refusing her in turn, because she had resisted him.

Jacques was fleeing in the melancholy night. He galloped up the path of a hill, fell back to the bottom of a narrow valley. Of pebbles rolling under his feet frightened him, he threw himself to the left among the bushes, made a hook that brought him back to the right, on an empty shelf. Suddenly, he

ran down, he stumbled against the railroad hedge: a train was coming, rumbling, blazing; and he didn’t understand at first, terrified. Ah! yes, all these people passing by, the continual flood, while he was dying there! He set off again, climbed, descended again. Always now he found the way, at the bottom of deep trenches which dug abysses, on embankments which closed the horizon of giant barricades. This deserted country, cut by mounds, was like a dead end labyrinth, where its madness turned, in the gloomy desolation of wasteland. And for many minutes he had been beating the slopes when he saw the round opening in front of him, the black mouth of the tunnel. A rising train rushed through it, howling and whistling, leaving, gone, drunk by the earth, a long tremor whose ground trembled.

Then Jacques, his legs broken, fell to the edge of the line, and he burst into convulsive sobs, sprawled on his stomach, his face sunk in the grass. My God! So he had returned, that abominable illness from which he believed himself cured? Now he had wanted to kill her, this girl! Kill a woman, kill a woman! it sounded in his ears, from the depths of his youth, with the growing, maddening fever of desire. As the others, under the awakening of puberty, dream of owning one, he was enraged at the idea of killing one. Because he could not lie to himself, he had taken the scissors to stick them in his flesh, as soon as he had seen her, that flesh, that throat, warm and white. And it wasn’t because she resisted, no! it was for pleasure, because he wanted it, such a desire that, if he hadn’t clung to the weeds, he would have gone back there, galloping, to cut his throat. Her, my God! this Flora he had seen growing up, this wild child by whom he had just felt loved so deeply. His twisted fingers dug into the earth, his sobs tearing his throat open, in a groan of terrible despair.

Yet he was trying to calm down, he wanted to understand. What was it that was different when he compared to others? There, in Plassans, in his youth, he had often already wondered. His mother Gervaise, it is true, had had him very young, at fifteen and a half; but the second only arrived, she was barely entering her fourteenth year, when she had given birth to the first, Claude; and none of his brothers, nor Claude nor Etienne, born later, only seemed to suffer a mother if the child and father g amin like her, this beautiful Lantier, whose poor heart had cost so much to Gervaise tears. Perhaps his brothers also had their own illness, which they did not admit, especially the eldest who devoured himself to want to be a painter, so

furiously, that he was said to be half mad about his genius. The family was not calm, many had a fracture. He, at certain times, felt it well, this hereditary crack; not that he was in poor health, for the apprehension and shame of his crises had only made him thin in the past; but they were, in his being, sudden losses of balance, like breaks, holes through which his ego escaped him, in the midst of a sort of great smoke which distorted everything. He no longer belonged to himself, he obeyed his muscles, the rabid beast. However, he did not drink, he even refused himself a small glass of brandy, having noticed that the slightest drop of alcohol was driving him crazy. And he came to think that he was paying for the others, the fathers, the grandfathers, who had drunk, the generations of drunkards whose blood he was spoiled, a slow poisoning, a savagery that brought him back with the eating wolves of women, deep in the woods.

Jacques had risen on one elbow, reflecting, looking at the dark entrance to the tunnel; and another sob ran from his loins to the back of his neck, he fell back, he rolled his head on the ground, screaming in pain. This girl, this girl he had wanted to kill! It came back to him, sharp, dreadful, as if the scissors had penetrated his own flesh. No reasoning appeased him: he had wanted to kill her, he would kill her, if she was still there, unhooked, bare throat. He remembered well, he was barely sixteen years old, the first time, when the trouble had seized him, one evening when he was playing with a kid, the daughter of a relative, his younger two: she had fallen, he had seen her legs, and he had rushed. The following year, he remembered sharpening a knife to drive it into the neck of another, a little blonde, whom he saw every morning pass by his door. This one had a very fat neck, very pink, where he was already choosing the place, a brown sign, under the ear. Then there were others, still others, a nightmare parade, all those that murder, the women elbowed in the street, the women whom he met his neighbors, one especially, a new bride, sitting near him in the theater, who laughed very loudly, and whom he had had to flee, in the middle of an act, so as not to disembowel it. Since he didn’t know them, what anger could he have against them? for each time it was like a sudden fit of blind rage, an ever-renewed thirst to avenge very old offenses, of which he had lost the exact memory. Did it come from so far away, from the evil that women had done to his race, from the resentment piled up from male to male, since the first deception deep in the caves? And he felt too, in its fit, a need for battle to

conquer the female and tame her, the perverted need to throw her dead on her back, like a prey that is snatched from others, forever. His skull was bursting with the effort, he could not answer himself, too ignorant, he thought, his brain too deaf, in that anguish of a man driven to acts in which his will was for nothing, and whose cause in him had disappeared.

A train, again, passed with the flash of its lights, crashed into a thunderbolt which rumbles and goes out, at the end of the tunnel; and Jacques, as if this anonymous crowd, indifferent and in a hurry, had been able to hear him, had risen, repressing his sobs, taking an innocent attitude. How many times, following one of his attacks, he had had guilty fits like this at the slightest noise! He only lived quiet, happy, detached from the world, on his machine. When it carried him away in the trepidation of its wheels, at high speed, when he had his hand on the shifting wheel, taken entirely by the monitoring of the track, watching for signals, he no longer thought, he breathed largely pure air which always blew like a storm. And that was why he loved his machine so much, like a soothing mistress, from whom he expected nothing but happiness. At the end of the school of arts and crafts, despite his lively intelligence, he had chosen this trade of mechanic, for the loneliness and the giddiness in which he lived there, without ambition moreover, arrived in four years at the post of first class mechanic, already earning two thousand eight hundred francs, which, with its heating and lubrication bonuses, put it at over four thousand, but dreaming of nothing beyond. He saw his comrades in third and second class, those formed by the Company, the workers and fitters that it took to make students of them, he saw almost all of them marry workers, effaced women that we only sometimes saw at school. time of departure, when they brought the small baskets of provisions; while the ambitious comrades, especially those who left a school, waited to be heads of depot before getting married, in the hope of finding a bourgeois, a lady with a hat. He, fled from women, what did he care? He would never get married, he had no other future than to ride alone, ride again and again, without rest. So all his bosses gave him for an offline mechanic, not drinking, not running, joked only by the party comrades about his excess of good behavior, and silently worrying the others, when he fell to his sorrows, mute, pale eyes, earthy face. In his little room on rue Cardinet, from where we saw the Batignolles depot, to which his machine belonged, which hours he remembered having

spent, all his free hours, locked up like a monk at the bottom of his cell, wearing out the revolt of his desires by dint of sleep, sleeping on the window!

With an effort, Jacques tried to get up. What was he doing there in the grass on that warm misty winter night? The countryside remained drowned in shadow, there was no light except in the sky, the fine fog, the immense dome of frosted glass, which the moon, hidden behind, lit up with a pale yellow reflection; and the black horizon was sleeping, deadly still. Let’s go! it must have been almost nine o’clock, But, in his numbness, he saw himself back at the Misards, going up the stairs to the attic, stretching out on the hay, against Flore’s room, a simple plank partition. She would be there, he would hear her breathe; even he knew she never closed her door, he could join her. And his great shiver took him again, the evoked image of this stripped girl, her limbs abandoned and warm from sleep, shook him once again with a sob whose violence brought him down to the ground. He had wanted to kill her, wanted to kill her, my God! He was suffocating, he was agonizing at the idea that he would go and kill her in his bed later, if he returned. He might not have a weapon, to wrap his head in his two arms, to annihilate himself: he felt that the male, outside his will, would push open the door, strangle the girl, under the whip of the instinct of kidnapping and by need to avenge the old insult. No no! rather spend the night in the countryside, than to go back there! He had jumped up, he started to flee again.

Then again, for half an hour, he galloped through the black countryside, as if the raging pack of terror had pursued him with their barks. He climbed hills, he hurtled down narrow gorges. In quick succession, two streams presented themselves: he crossed them, got wet up to his hips. A bush that blocked his way, exasperated him. His only thought was to go straight ahead, further, ever further, to flee from himself, to flee the other, the enraged beast he felt in him. But he won, she was galloping just as hard. For the seven months he had thought he had chased her away, he had taken over everyone’s existence; and now she had to start all over again, she would have to fight again, so that she did not jump on the first woman elbowed by chance. The great silence, however, the vast solitude soothed him a little, made him dream of a silent and deserted life like this desolate country, where he would always walk, without ever meeting a soul. without

knowing it, for he came back on the other side, stumbling against the track, after having described a wide semicircle, among the slopes, bristling with brush, above the tunnel. He stepped back, with the uneasy anger of falling on the living. Then, having wanted to cut behind a mound, he got lost, found himself in front of the railroad hedge, just outside the tunnel, in front of the meadow where he had sobbed earlier. And, defeated, he remained motionless when the thunder of a train emerging from the depths of the earth, still light, growing from second to second, stopped him. It was the Le Havre express, which left Paris at six-thirty, and which passed there at nine-twenty-five: a train which, from two days in two days, he was driving.

Jacques first saw the black mouth of the tunnel light up, as well as the mouth of an oven, where bundles were set ablaze. Then, in the noise it brought, it was the machine that sprang from it, with the dazzling of its big round eye, the front lantern, whose fire broke through the countryside, lighting up the rails of a double line of flame. But it was an apparition in love at first sight: immediately the wagons followed one another, the small square windows of the doors, violently lit, made the compartments full of travelers scroll past, in such vertigo of speed, that the eye then doubted. images interviews. And Jacques, very distinctly, at this precise quarter of a second, saw, through the blazing mirrors of a coupe, a man holding another one upside down on the bench and thrusting a knife in his throat, while a sledgehammer black, perhaps a third person, perhaps a collapsed baggage, weighed with all its weight on the convulsive legs of the murdered one. The train was already fleeing, losing itself towards Croix-de-Maufras, showing only the three rear lights in the darkness, the red triangle.

Stuck in place, the young man followed with his eyes the train, whose rumbling died down, deep in the great dead peace of campaign. Did he see correctly? and he hesitated now, he no longer dared to assert the reality of this vision, brought and carried away in a flash. Not a single trait of the two actors in the drama had remained alive to him. The brown mass must have been a travel blanket, fallen across the victim’s body. Yet at first he thought he could make out, beneath an unwinding of thick hair, a thin, pale profile. But everything merged, evaporated, as in a dream. For a moment, the profile, evoked, reappeared; then he stepped aside for good. It was probably just an imagination. And all this froze him, seemed so extraordinary to him

that he ended up admitting a hallucination, born from the terrible crisis he had just gone through.

For nearly an hour more Jacques walked, his head heavy with confused musings. He was broken, a relaxation was taking place, a great cold inside had carried away his fever. Without having decided, he ended up coming back to Croix-de-Maufras. Then, when he found himself in front of the gatekeeper's house, he told himself that he would not go in, that he would sleep in the little shed, sealed by one of the gables. But a ray of light passed under the door, and he pushed open the door mechanically. An unexpected sight stopped him on the threshold.

Misard, in the corner, had disturbed the butter pot; and, at four paws on the ground, a lighted lantern placed near him, he probed the wall with light punches, he searched. The sound of the door made him sit up. Besides, he was not in the least bit disturbed, he said simply, with a natural air:

"It is matches that have fallen."

And, when he had put the butter pot back in place, he added:

"I came to take my lantern, because a little while ago, on returning, I saw an individual lying on the track… I believe he is dead."

Jacques, seized at first at the thought that he caught Misard looking for Aunt Phasie's loot, which suddenly changed his doubt about the accusations of this last, was then so violently moved by this news of the discovery of a corpse that he forgot the other drama, the one that was playing out there, in this little lost house. The coupe scene, the brief sight of a man slaughtering a man, had been reborn by the same lightning.

—A man on the way, where? he asked, paling.

Misard was going to tell that he was bringing back two eels, unhooked from his end lines, and that he had first of all galloped to his house, to hide them. But what need to confide in this boy? He made only a vague gesture, answering:

"Over there, as if they might say five hundred yards away. You have to see clearly, to know."

At that moment Jacques heard a muffled shock above his head. He was so anxious that he jumped.

"It's nothing," replied the father, "it's Flore who is moving."

And the young man, in fact, recognized the sound of two bare feet on the floor. She must have waited for him, she came to listen, through her

door ajar.

“I am accompanying you,” he continued. And are you sure he’s dead?

—Lady! it seemed to me. With the lantern, we’ll see.

—Finally, what do you say? An accident, isn’t it?

—That could be. Some fellow who has been cut, or perhaps a traveler who has jumped out of a wagon.

Jacques shuddered.

—Come quickly!

Never had such a fever to see, to know, stirred him. Outside, while his companion, without any emotion, followed the track, swinging the lantern, the circle of light of which gently followed the rails, he ran forward, annoyed at this slowness. It was like a physical desire, this interior fire which precipitates the march of lovers, at meeting times. He was afraid of what awaited him there, and he flew there, with every muscle in his limbs. When he arrived, when he almost bumped into a black heap, lying near the downward path, he stood there, jerked from heels to the back of his neck. And his anguish at not distinguishing anything clearly, turned into curses against the other, who lingered more than thirty paces behind.

—But, for God’s sake! come on! if he was still alive, we could help him.

Misard waddled, stepped forward, calmly. Then, when he had moved the lantern over the body:

—Ah! ouitche, he has his account.

The individual, no doubt tumbling from a wagon, had fallen on his stomach, face against the ground, no more than two feet from the rails. All you could see of her head was a thick crown of white hair. Her legs were spread apart. With his arms, the right was lying as if torn, while the left was folded under the chest. He was very well dressed, a loose overcoat of blue cloth, elegant boots, fine linen. The body did not bear any traces of crushing, a lot of blood had only flowed from the throat and stained the collar of the shirt.

“A bourgeois with whom we have done his business,” said Misard quietly, after a few seconds of silent examination.

Then, turning to Jacques, motionless, yawning:

“Do not touch, it is forbidden… You will stay there, guarding him, you, while I am going to run to Barentin to tell the station master.”

He raised his lantern, looked at a kilometer post.

—Well! just at post 153.

And, placing the lantern on the ground, close to the body, he shuffled away.

Jacques, left alone, did not move, still gazing at this inert, collapsed mass, which the vague light, at ground level, left confused. And, in him, the agitation which had precipitated his walk, the horrible attraction which held him there, resulted in this acute thought, springing from his whole being: the other, the man glimpsed with knife in hand, had dared ! the other had gone to the end of his desire, the other had killed! Ah! not to be cowardly, finally to be satisfied, to drive the knife! Him whom envy tortured for ten years! There was, in his fever, a contempt for himself and admiration for the other, and especially the need to see that, eyes of that human rag, of the broken puppet, of the soft rag that a knife cut made of a creature. What he dreamed, the other had realized, and that was it. If he killed, it would be on the floor. His heart was beating wildly, his itching for murder was exasperated like concupiscence at the sight of this tragic death. He took a step, approached closer, like a nervous child who is familiarizing himself with fear. Yes! he would dare, he would dare in his turn!

But a growl behind his back forced him to jump aside. A train was coming, which he had not even heard, in the depths of his contemplation. He was going to be crushed, breath hot, the formidable blast of the machine had only warned him. The train passed, in its hurricane of noise, smoke and flame. There were still many people, the flow of travelers continued towards Le Havre, for the feast the next day. A child was crushing his nose against a window, looking out over the dark countryside; profiles of men were outlined, while a young woman, lowering a mirror, threw a paper stained with butter and sugar. Already the merry train was spinning in the distance, in the carelessness of this corpse which its wheels had grazed. And the body still lay on its face, dimly lit by the lantern, in the midst of the melancholy peace of the night.

So Jacques was seized with the desire to see the wound while he was alone. A worry stopped him, the idea that if he touched the head it might be noticed. He had calculated that Misard could hardly be back, with the station master, before three quarters of an hour. And he let the minutes pass, he thought of this Misard, this puny, so slow, so calm, who also dared, killing the most quietly in the world, with drugs. Was it really easy to kill?

everyone was killing. He moved closer. The idea of seeing the wound stung him with a sting so sharp that his flesh burned. See how it was done and what sank, see the red hole! If you put your head back carefully, you wouldn’t know anything. But there was another fear, unacknowledged, at the bottom of his hesitation, the very fear of blood. Always and in everything, in him, terror had awakened with desire. Still a quarter of an hour to be alone, and he was about to make up his mind, however, when a little noise, at his side, made him tremble.

It was Flore, standing, looking like him. She was curious about accidents: as soon as you announced a crushed animal, a man cut by a train, you were sure to make her come running. She had just dressed, she wanted to see the dead man. And, after the first glance, she didn’t hesitate. Se bending down, lifting the lantern with one hand, with the other she took the head and threw it back.

“Beware, it’s forbidden,” whispered Jacques.

But she shrugged. And the head appeared, in the yellow light, the head of an old man, with a big nose, with blue eyes of old blond, wide open. Under the chin, the wound yawned, hideous, a deep gash that had cut the neck, a plowed wound, as if the knife had turned over while searching. Blood was flooding the entire right side of the chest. On the left, at the buttonhole of the overcoat, a commander’s rosette looked like a red clot, lost there.

Flore had given a slight cry of surprise.

—Here! the old!

Jacques, bending down like her, came forward, mingling his hair with hers, the better to see; and he was suffocating, he gorged himself with the spectacle. Unconsciously, he repeated:

“The old man… the old man…”

Yes, old Grandmorin… The president.

For a moment more, she examined that pale face, with its crooked mouth, its large eyes of terror. Then she let go of the head that the rigor mortis was starting to freeze, and which fell back to the ground, closing the wound.

—No more laughing with the girls! she continued lower. It’s because of one, for sure… Ah! my poor Louisette, ah! the pig is well done!

And a long silence reigned. Flore, who had put down the lantern, waited, glancing slowly at Jacques; while the latter, separated from her by the body, had no longer moved, as if lost, annihilated in what he had just seen. It must have been almost eleven o'clock. An embarrassment after the scene of the evening prevented her from speaking first. But a sound of voices was heard, it was his father who was bringing the station master back; and, not wishing to be seen, she made up her mind.

—Aren't you coming home to bed?

He started, a debate seemed to agitate him for a moment. Then, with an effort, in a desperate retreat:-

No, no!

She didn't move, but the drooping line of her strong girl's arms expressed a lot of grief. forgive her resistance earlier, she was very humble, she said again: "So you won't come home, I won't see you again?"

—No no!

The voices approached, and without trying to shake his hand, since he seemed to put this corpse between them on purpose, without even bowing him the familiar farewell of their childhood comradeship, she walked away, lost herself in the darkness, the hoarse breath, as if stifling sobs.

Immediately, the station master was there, with Misard and two crew members. He too noted the identity: it was indeed President Grandmorin, whom he knew, to see him descend to his station, each time he went to see his sister, Madame Bonnehon, in Doinville. The body could stay where it had fallen, he only had it covered with a cloak, which one of the men brought. An employee had taken the eleven o'clock train from Barentin to notify the Imperial Procurator of Rouen. But he should not be counted on before five or six in the morning, because he would have to bring the examining magistrate, the clerk of the court and a doctor. So the station master organized a guard service near the dead person: all night long, we would take turns, a man would be there constantly, watching with the lantern.

And Jacques, before deciding to go and lie down in some shed at Barentin station, from which he was not to leave for Le Havre until twenty past seven, remained a long time still, motionless, obsessed. Then, the idea of the examining magistrate that they were expected troubled him, as if he had felt an accomplice. Would he say what he had seen when the express

went by? At first he resolved to speak, since he had nothing to fear after all. His duty, moreover, was not in doubt. But then he wondered what the good was: he wouldn’t bring a single decisive fact, he wouldn’t dare to assert any precise details about the assassin. It would be foolish to get into this, to be emotional, without profit for anyone. No, no, he wouldn’t speak! And he left at last, and he turned around twice, to see the black bump the body was making on the ground, in the yellow circle of the lantern. A sharper cold fell from the smoky sky over the desolation of this desert, with its arid hillsides. More trains had passed, another was arriving, for Paris, very long. All crossed, in their inexorable mechanical power, sped to their distant goal, in the future, brushing, without noticing it, the half-severed head of this man, whom another man had slaughtered.

III

The next day, a Sunday, five in the morning came from ringing at all the bell towers of Le Havre, when Roubaud got down from the Marquise de la Gare, to take his service. It was still pitch black; but the wind, which blew from the sea, had grown and pushed the mists, drowning the hillsides whose heights stretched from Sainte-Adresse to the fort of Tourneville; while towards the west, above the sea, a clearing appeared, a patch of sky, in which the last stars shone. Under the marquise, the gas lamps were still burning, paled by the damp cold and the early hour; and there was the first train from Montivilliers, formed by crew members, under the orders of the night sub-chief. The doors of the rooms were not open, the platforms stretched out deserted, in this numb awakening of the station.

As he was leaving his house, above, above the waiting rooms, Roubaud had found the cashier's wife, Madame Lebleu, motionless in the middle of the central corridor, onto which the employees' quarters overlooked. For weeks now, this lady had been getting up at night, to watch Mademoiselle Guichon, the tobacconist, whom she suspected of an intrigue with the chef de gare, M. Dabadie. D'ailleurs, elle n'avait jamais surpris la moindre chose, pas une ombre, pas un souffle. Et, ce matin-là encore, she had quickly returned home, only reporting the astonishment at having seen, at the Roubauds, during the three seconds taken by the husband to open and close the door, the wife standing in the dining room, the beautiful Séverine already dressed, combed, wearing shoes, she who usually hung out in bed until nine o'clock. Also, Madame Lebleu had awakened Lebleu, to teach him this extraordinary fact. The day before, they had not gone to bed before the arrival of the express from Paris at five past eleven, burning to know what was happening to the story of the sub-prefect. But they had been unable to read anything in the attitude of the Roubauds, who had returned with their everyday faces; and, in vain, until midnight, they had strained their ears: no sound came from their neighbors, they must have fallen asleep immediately, a deep sleep. Certainly their trip does what Séverine would

not have been up at such an hour. The cashier having asked what face she looked, his wife had tried to portray her: very stiff, very pale, with her large blue eyes, so clear under her black hair; and not a movement, the air of a sleepwalker. Finally, we would know what to expect during the day.

Downstairs, Roubaud found his colleague Moulin, who had done the night shift. And he took the service, while Moulin was chatting, walking around for a few more minutes, while informing him of the small facts which had arrived since the day before: prowlers had been surprised when they entered the dining room. deposit; three crewmen had been reprimanded for indiscipline; a coupling hook had just broken, while the Montivilliers train was being formed. Silent, Roubaud listened with a calm face; and he was only a little pale, no doubt a remnant of fatigue, which his beaten eyes also showed. However, his colleague had stopped talking, which he seemed to be questioning him again, as if he had expected other events. But that was all, he lowered his head, looked at the earth for a moment.

While walking along the quay, the two men had reached the end of the covered hall, at the place where, on the right, There was a shed, in which the running cars were parked, those which, arrived the day before, were used to form the trains for the next day. And he had raised his forehead, his eyes were fixed on a first-class carriage, provided with a coupe, the number 293, which a gas-lamp precisely lit with a flickering light, when the other cried:

—Ah! I forgot…

Roubaud’s pale face grew colored, and he could not restrain a slight movement.

“I forgot,” repeated Moulin. This car must not leave, do not put it in the six -forty express this morning.

There was a short silence, before Roubaud asked, with a voice very natural:-

Here! why is that?

—Because there’s a coupe booked for tonight’s express. We are not sure that it will come in the day, we might as well keep this one.

He was still staring at him, he replied:

“No doubt.”

But another thought absorbed him, he suddenly lost his temper.

—It’s disgusting! See me how those buggers cleanse! This car appears to have dust from eight days.

—Ah! continued Moulin, when the trains arrive after eleven o’clock, there is no danger of the men wiping the cloth… things are still going well when they agree to pay the visit. The other night, sleeping traveler, who did not wake up until the next morning.

Then, stifling a yawn, he said he was going up to bed. And, as he was leaving, a sudden curiosity brought him back.

“By the way, your affair with the sub-prefect, it’s over, isn’t it?”

—Yes, yes, a very good trip, I’m happy.

—Come, so much the better… And remember that 293 is not leaving.

When Roubaud found himself alone on the platform, he slowly returned to the waiting train from Montivilliers. The doors of the rooms were opened, travelers appeared, a few hunters with their dogs, two or three families of shopkeepers taking advantage of Sunday, few people in fact. But, this train gone, the first of the day, he had no time to lose, he immediately had to arrange for the five-forty-five omnibus, a train for Rouen and Paris. At this early hour, the staff being few, the work of the deputy head of department was complicated by all kinds of care. When he had watched the maneuver, each car taken in storage, put on the cart that men were pushing and bringing under the awning, he had to run to the departure hall, take a look at the distribution of tickets and baggage check-in. A quarrel broke out between soldiers and an employee, which necessitated his intervention. during half an hour, among the icy currents of air, in the midst of the shivering audience, their eyes still heavy with sleep, in this bad mood of a stampede in full darkness, he multiplied, did not have a thought of his own. Then, the departure of the omnibus having cleared the station, he hastened to go to the switchman’s post, to make sure that all was well on that side, because another train was arriving, direct from Paris, which had late. He returned to witness the disembarkation, waited until the flood of travelers had returned the tickets and piled up in the carriages of the hotels which, at that time, were entering to wait under the marquise, separated from the track by a simple fence. And, only then was he able to breathe for a moment in the station, which had once again become deserted and silent.

Six o’clock struck. Roubaud left the covered hall with a stroll; and, outside, having space in front of him, he raised his head, he breathed, seeing that dawn was breaking at last. The offshore wind had finished sweeping the mists, it was the clear morning of a fine day. He looked north at the Ingouville hill, as far as the cemetery trees, stand out in a purplish line against the pale sky; then, turning to the south and the west, he noticed, above the sea, a last flight of light white clouds, which swam slowly in squadron; while the whole east, the immense gap at the mouth of the Seine, began to set ablaze at the coming sunrise. With a mechanical gesture, he had just taken off his cap, embroidered with silver, as if to refresh his forehead in the crisp, pure air. This accustomed horizon, the vast flat unfolding of the outbuildings of the station, on the left the arrival, then the Machine depot, on the right the expedition, a whole town, seemed to appease him, to restore him to the calm of his daily work, eternally the same. Over the wall of rue Charles-Laffitte, factory chimneys were smoking, we could see the huge piles of coal in the warehouses, which run along the basin. Vauban. And a rumor was already rising from the other pools. The whistles of the freight trains, the alarm clock and the smell of the waves blowing in the wind, made him think of the feast of the day, of this ship that was about to be launched and around which the crowd would crash.

As Roubaud entered the covered hall, he found the team beginning to form the six-forty express; and he thought the men were putting the 293 on the cart, all the calm of the cool morning went away in a sudden burst of anger.

—For God Sake! not that car! So leave her alone! She’s not leaving until tonight.

The team leader explained to him that car, to take another, which was behind. But he did not hear, deafened by his anger, out of all proportion.

—Thoughs of clumsy people, when you are told not to touch it!

When he finally understood, he remained furious, came across the inconveniences of the station, where one could not only turn a car. Indeed, the station, built one of the first in the line, was insufficient, unworthy of Le Havre, with its restoration in old framework, its wooden and zinc awning, with narrow windows, its bare and sad buildings, cracked on all sides…

—It’s a shame, I don’t know how the Company hasn’t knocked it down yet.

The men on the team looked at him, surprised to hear him speak freely, him usually so disciplined. He noticed it, stopped suddenly. And, silent, stiff, he continued to watch the maneuver. A line of discontent cut his low forehead, while his round, colored face, bristling with a red beard, took on a deep tension of will.

From then on, Roubaud had all his composure. He busied himself actively with the express, checking every detail. The teams having appeared to him badly made, he insisted that they be tightened before his eyes. A mother and two daughters, whom his wife was seeing, wanted alone. Then, before whistling to give the signal for departure, he made sure again that the train was in good order; and he watched him walk away for a long time, that clear look of men whose distraction a minute can cost lives. Immediately, moreover, he had to cross the track to receive a train from Rouen, which was entering the station. In fact, there was a postal employee there, with whom he exchanged news every day. It was, in his busy morning, a short rest, nearly a quarter of an hour, during which he could breathe, no immediate service calling for it. And that morning, as usual, he rolled a cigarette, he talked very cheerfully. The day had grown, the gas lamps had just been extinguished under the awning. It was so poorly glazed that a gray shadow still reigned there; but, beyond, the vast stretch of sky onto which it opened, was already ablaze with a fire of rays; while the entire horizon turned pink, with vivid clarity of detail, in that pure air of a fine winter morning.

At eight o’clock M. Dabadie, the station master, usually got out, and the deputy went to report. He was a handsome man, very dark, well-kept, having the appearance of a great merchant all about his business. Besides, he willingly took no interest in the passenger station, he devoted himself above all to movement of the basins, the enormous transit of goods, in continual relations with the high commerce of Le Havre and the whole world. That day he was late; and twice already Roubaud had pushed open the office door without finding him there. On the table the mail was not even open. The sous-chef’s eyes had just fallen, among the letters, on a dispatch. Then as if a fascination held him there, he hadn’t left the door, turning around in spite of himself, throwing short glances at the table.

At last, at ten past eight, M. Dabadie appeared. Roubaud, who had sat down, was silent to allow him to open the dispatch. But the chief was in no hurry, wanted to be kind to his subordinate, whom he esteemed.

“And naturally in Paris everything went well?”

—Yes, sir, thank you.

He had ended by opening the dispatch; and he was not reading it, he was still smiling at the other, whose voice had muffled, under the violent effort he was making to control a nervous tic which was convulsing his chin.

—We are very happy to keep you here.

“And I, sir, am very happy to stay with you.”

Then, as M. Dabadie made up his mind to read the despatch, Roubaud, with a light sweat wet his face, looked at him. But the emotion he expected did not occur; the chief quietly finished reading the telegram, which he threw back on his desk: no doubt a simple detail of the service. And immediately he continued to open his mail, while, according to the habit of each morning, the deputy made his verbal report on the events of the night and the morning. Only that morning Roubaud, hesitating, had to search, before remembering what his colleague had said to him about the prowlers surprised in the locker room. A few more words were exchanged, and the chief dismissed him with a gesture, when the two deputy chiefs, that of the basins and that of the slow speed, entered, also coming to report. They brought a new dispatch, which an employee had just given them, on the quay.

“You may retire,” said M. Dabadie, seeing that Roubaud stopped at the door.

But he waited, his eyes round and fixed; and he did not go away until the little piece of paper had fallen back on the table, pushed aside with the same indifferent gesture. For a moment he wandered under the marquee, perplexed, dazed. The clock marked eight thirty-five, he had no more departure before the nine- fifty omnibus. Usually he would use that hour of respite walking around the station. He walked for a few minutes, not knowing where his feet were leading him. Then, as he raised his head and found himself in front of car 293, he made a sudden hook, he walked away towards the machinery depot, although he had nothing to see from that side. The sun was now rising on the horizon, gold dust was raining down in the

pale air. And he was no longer enjoying the beautiful morning, he hurried his pace, looking very busy, trying to kill the obsession with his waiting.

A voice suddenly stopped him.

—Monsieur Roubaud, hello! … Have you seen my wife?

It was Pecqueux, the chauffeur, a tall fellow of forty-three, thin with big bones, his face baked from the fire and smoke. His gray eyes under the low forehead, his wide mouth in a protruding jaw, laughed with a continual honeymoon laugh.

—How? “Or” What! it’s you? said Roubaud, stopping, astonished. Ah! yes, the accident happened to the machine, I forgot… And you do not leave until this evening? Twenty-four hour leave, good deal, eh?

—Good deal! repeated the other, still gray from a wedding the day before.

From a village near Rouen, he joined the Company at a young age as a fitter worker. Then, at the age of thirty, being bored in the workshop, he wanted to be a driver, to become a mechanic; and it was then that he had married Victoire, from the same village as him. But the years went by, he remained a driver, never now would he become a mechanic, without driving, without good behavior, drunk, runner of women. Twenty times, he would have been dismissed, if he had not had the protection of President Grandmorin, and if we had not become accustomed to his vices, which he redeemed by his good humor and his experience of old worker. He only really became feared when he was drunk, because then he turned into a real bully, capable of a bad move.

—And my wife, have you seen her? he asked again, his mouth slit with his broad laughter.

“Certainly, yes, we have seen it,” replied the deputy. we even had lunch in your room… Ah! a good woman you have there, Pecqueux. And you are quite wrong not to be faithful to him.

He laughed more violently.

—Oh! so to speak! But she’s the one who wants me to have fun!

It was true. Victoire, two years older than him, who had grown enormous and difficult to move, slipped pennies into his pockets, so that he could have fun outside. She had never suffered much from his infidelities, from the continual death that he ran, from a need for nature; and now life was settled, he had two wives, one at each end of the line, his wife in Paris

for the nights he slept there, another in Le Havre for the hours of waiting that he spent there between two trains. Very thrifty, living scantily herself, Victoire, who knew everything and who treated him motherly, gladly repeated that she did not want to let him face the other over there. Even, at each departure, she watched over her laundry, for it would have been very sensitive to her if the other accused her of not keeping their man clean.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Roubaud, “that’s hardly nice. My wife, who adores her nurse, wants to scold you.”

But he was silent, seeing a tall, dry woman, Philomène Sauvagnat, coming out of a shed, against which they were standing. sister of the depot manager, the additional wife that Pecqueux had in Le Havre for a year. Both must have been chatting in the hangar when he had stepped forward to call for the deputy. She, still young despite her thirty-two years, tall, angular, her chest flat, her flesh burnt with continual desires, had a long head, with flaming eyes, a thin and neighing run. He was accused of drinking. All the men from the station had paraded to her house, to the little house her brother occupied near the Machine Depot, and which she kept very dirty. This brother, from Auvergne, stubborn, very severe on discipline, highly esteemed by his leaders, had had the biggest trouble about him, to the point of being threatened with dismissal; and if now she was tolerated because of him, he himself persisted in keeping her only out of family spirit; which did not prevent him, when he caught her with a man, from beating her so badly that he left her on the floor, dead. There had been a real encounter between her and Pecqueux : she, finally satisfied, in the arms of this great laughing devil; he, changed from his too fat wife, happy about her too thin, repeating as a joke that he no longer needed to look elsewhere. And Séverine alone, who believed she owed this to Victoire, had quarreled with Philomène, whom she was already avoiding as much as possible, by a pride of nature, and which she had ceased to greet.

—Well! said Philomène insolently. See you later, Pecqueux. I’m leaving, since Monsieur Roubaud has some moral to teach you, from his wife.

He, a good boy, was still laughing.

—Stay then, he jokes.

—No no! I must go and carry two eggs from my hens, which I promised Madame Lebleu.

She had launched this name on purpose, knowing the muffled rivalry between the cashier's wife and the deputy's wife, affecting to be at best with the first, to enrage the other. But she remained, all of a sudden, interested, when she heard the driver ask for news of the sub-prefect's affair.

—It's arranged, you're happy, isn't it? Mr. Roubaud?

—Very happy.

Pecqueux blinked slyly.

—Oh! you didn't have to be worried, because when you have a big hat up your sleeve… huh? you know who I mean. My wife is also very grateful to him.

The sous-chef interrupted this allusion to President Grandmorin, repeating in an abrupt voice:

"And then you are not leaving until this evening?"

—Yes, the Lison will be repaired, we are finishing adjusting the connecting rod… And I'm waiting for my mechanic, who has given himself some air. You do you know him, Jacques Lantier? He is from your country.

For a moment Roubaud remained without answering, absent, his mind lost. Then, with a start of waking up:

—Eh? Jacques Lantier, the mechanic… Certainly, I know him. Oh! you know, hello, good evening. This is where we met, because he is my younger brother, and I had never seen him, over there, in Plassans… Last fall, he did my wife a little service, a commission he made for her, with cousins, in Dieppe… A capable boy, they say.

He spoke at random, of abundance. Suddenly he walked away.

—Bye, Pecqueux… I have to take a look this way.

Only then did Philomène go away, with her elongated running stride; while Pecqueux, motionless, his hands in his pockets, laughing with pleasure at the laziness of this cheerful morning, was astonished that the sous-chef, after having contented himself with going around the hangar, was returning quickly. It wasn't long to give, his glance. What on earth could he have said ?

As Roubaud returned to the marchioness, nine o'clock was about to strike. He walked to the far end, near the couriers, looked, without seeming to find what he was looking for; then he returned, with the same pace of impatience. Successively, he questioned the offices of the different services.

was calm, deserted; and he was agitated there alone, the air more and more irritated by this peace, in this torment of the man, threatened by a catastrophe, which ends by ardently wishing that it breaks out. His cool was at its wit's end, he couldn't keep still. Now his eyes never left the clock. Nine o'clock, nine five. Usually he didn't come home until ten o'clock, after the nine- fifty train had left, for lunch. And, all of a sudden, he came back to the thought of Séverine, who, too, up there, had to wait.

In the hallway, at this precise moment, Madame Lebleu opened the door to Philomène, who had come as a neighbor, disheveled, and holding two eggs. They stayed; Roubaud had to go home, under their staring eyes. He had his key, he hurried. All the same, in the rapid comings and goings of the door, they saw Severine, sitting on a chair in the dining room, her hands idle, her profile pale, motionless. And, attracting Philomène, shutting herself up in her turn, Madame Lebleu said that she had already seen her like this in the morning: no doubt the story of the sub-prefect that was going wrong. But no, Philomène explained that she was running, because she had news; and she repeated what she had just heard say to the deputy himself. So the two women got lost in conjectures. They were thus, at each of their meetings, endless gossip.

—We washed their heads, my child, I would put my hand in the fire… Of course, they shake in the handle.

—Ah! my good lady, if we could get rid of it!

The increasingly bitter rivalry between the Lebleu and the Roubauds was born simply from a question of accommodation. The entire first floor, above the waiting rooms, was used to accommodate employees; and the central corridor, a real hotel corridor, painted yellow, lit from above, divided the floor in two, lining up the brown doors to the right and to the left. Only the dwellings on the right had windows that overlooked the departure courtyard, planted with old elms, over which the admirable view of the Ingouville coast stretched out; while the lodgings on the left, with arched, crushed windows, opened directly onto the marquee of the station, whose high slope, zinc ridge and dirty panes barred the horizon. Nothing was more cheerful than some, with the continual animation of the court, the greenery of the trees, the vast countryside; and there was enough to die of boredom in the others, where one could hardly see clearly, the sky walled up as in prison. In front, lived the station master, the Moulin sous-chef and

the Lebleu family; on the back, the Roubauds, as well as the tobacconist, mademoiselle Guichon, not to mention three rooms, which were reserved for visiting inspectors. However, it was well known that the two sous-chefs avaient toujours logé côte à côte. Si les Lebleu were there, it came from the complacency of the former sous-chef, replaced by Roubaud, who, a widower without children, had wanted to be agreeable to Madame Lebleu, by giving her his accommodation. But shouldn't this accommodation have returned to Roubauds? Was it fair to relegate them to the rear when they were allowed to be in the front? As long as the two households had lived in harmony, Séverine had withdrawn in front of her neighbor, older than her twenty years, ill with that, so enormous that she was constantly suffocating. And the war had only really been declared since the day when Philomène had angered the two women with abominable chatter.

"You know," resumed the latter, "that they are quite capable of having taken advantage of their trip to Paris, to ask for your expulsion… I have been told that they wrote the director a long letter in which they assert their right."

Madame Lebleu was suffocating.

—The wretches! … And I am quite sure that they are working to bring the tobacconist with them; for this one has barely greeted me for a fortnight… Something clean again! Also, I'm watching her…

She lowered her voice to affirm that Mademoiselle Guichon, every night, had to go meet the station master. Their two doors faced each other. It was M. Dabadie, a widower, father of a grown-up girl still in boarding school, who had brought there this thirty-year-old blonde, already faded, silent and thin, with the suppleness of a snake. She must have been vaguely a teacher. And impossible to surprise her, she slipped so noiselessly through the narrowest slits. By herself, she hardly mattered. But, if she slept with the station master, she assumed a decisive importance, and the triumph was to keep her, by possessing her secret.

—Oh! I'll end up knowing, continued Madame Lebleu. I do not want not let me eat… We are here, we will stay there. The good people are for us, is not it? my little.

The whole station, in fact, was passionate about this war of two lodgings. The corridor especially was ravaged by it. There was hardly the other sous-chef, Moulin, who was disinterested, satisfied to be in the front,

married to a shy and frail little woman, whom one never saw and who gave him a child all. the twenty months.

“Finally,” concluded Philomène, “if they move in the handle, it is not yet when they will remain on the floor… Beware, because they know people who have long arms.”

She was still holding her two eggs, she offered them: morning eggs, which she had just picked up from under her hens. And the old lady was confused in thanks.

—How nice you are! You spoil me… Come and talk more often. You know that my husband is always at his till; and I’m so bored, nailed here, because of my legs! What would become of me if these wretches took my sight?

Then, as she accompanied him and reopened the door, she put a finger to his lips.

—Shhh! let’s listen.

Both of them, standing in the hallway, stood for five long minutes without a gesture, holding their breath. They bent their heads, straining their ears towards the Roubauds dining room. But not a sound came from it, there reigned a dead silence. And, for fear of being surprised, they finally separated, nodding their heads one last time, without a word. One went on tiptoe, the other closed her door so gently that the bolt was not heard slipping into the strike.

At twenty past nine Roubaud was downstairs again, under the marquise. He was watching the formation of the nine -fifty omnibus; and, in spite of the effort of his will, he gesticulated more, he trampled, constantly turned his head to inspect the quay with his eyes, one end to the other. Nothing did not arrive, his hands were shaking.

Then, suddenly, as he was still searching the station with a glance behind him, he heard the voice of a telegraph clerk near him, saying breathlessly:

“Monsieur Roubaud, you don’t know where Monsieur is. the station master and the supervisor… I have dispatches there for them, and I’ve been running for ten minutes…”

He had turned around, in such a stiffening of his whole being, that not one muscle in his face didn’t move. His eyes fixed on the two dispatches

the employee was holding. This time, to the emotion of this one, he was sure it was finally disaster.

“Monsieur Dabadie passed there earlier,” he said quietly.

And never had he felt so cold, with such a clear intelligence, completely bandaged in defense. Now he was sure of himself.

—Hold! he went on, ’here it is, Monsieur Dabadie.

Indeed, the station master was returning from slow speed. As soon as he had read the dispatch, he exclaimed.

—There was an assassination on the line… It is the inspector of Rouen who is telegraphing me.

—How? “Or” What? asked Roubaud, an assassination among our staff?

—No, no, on a traveler, in a coupe… The body was thrown, almost at the exit of the tunnel of Malaunay, at post 153 … And the victim is one of our administrators, President Grandmorin.

In his turn, the sous-chef exclaimed.

—President! ah! will my poor wife be sorry!

The cry was so correct, so pitying, that M. Dabadie stopped there for a moment.

—That’s true, you knew him, such a good man, did n’t you?

Then, returning to the other telegram, addressed to the supervisory commissioner :

—It must be from the examining magistrate, probably for some formality… And it is only nine twenty-five, Monsieur Cauche is not there yet, of course… We go quickly to the Café du Commerce, on the Cours Napoléon. We will find it there for sure.

Five minutes later, Mr. Cauche arrived, brought back by a team man. A former officer, considering his job as a retirement, he never appeared at the station before ten o’clock, strolled there for a while, and returned to the cafe. This drama, which had fallen between two games of the stake, had surprised him at first, for the affairs which passed through his hands were usually not very serious. But the dispatch did come from the examining magistrate in Rouen; and if it arrived twelve hours after the discovery of the corpse, it was because this judge had first telegraphed to Paris, to the station master, to find out under what conditions the victim had left; then, filled in the number of the train and that of the car, he had only then sent the supervisory commissioner the order to visit the coupé which was in car 293,

if this car was still in Le Havre. Immediately, the bad humor which M. Cauche showed, of having been undoubtedly disturbed without doubt, disappeared and gave way to an attitude of extreme importance, proportionate to the exceptional gravity of the affair.

“But,” he cried, suddenly worried, with the fear of seeing the investigation slipping from him, “the car must not be here any longer, it must have left this morning.”

It was Roubaud who reassured him with his calm expression.

—No, no, excuse… There was a coupe chosen for this evening, the car is there, under the shed.

And he walked first, the commissioner and the station master followed him. However, the news had to spread, for the crewmen, slyly, left the work, followed them too; while, on the doors of the various departments, employees appeared, ended by approaching, one by one. Soon there was a gathering there.

As we arrived in front of the car, M. Dabadie said aloud:-

Yet, yesterday evening, the visit took place. If there were any traces left, they would have been noted in the report.

“We’ll see,” said M. Cauche.

He opened the door and got into the coupe. And, at the moment he even cried out, forgetting himself, swearing.

—Ah! For God Sake! looks like we bled a pig!

A little breath of terror ran through the assistants, heads stretched out; and M. Dabadie, one of the first, wanted to see, raised himself on the step; while, behind him, Roubaud, to do like the others, also craned his neck.

Inside, the coupe showed no mess. The windows had remained closed, everything seemed to be in place. Only, a terrible odor escaped from the open door; and there, in the middle of one of the cushions, a pool of black blood had coagulated, a pool so deep, so wide, that a stream had gushed out as from a spring, pouring out on the carpet. Clots remained clinging to the sheet. And nothing else, nothing but that smelly blood.

M. Dabadie lost his temper.

Where are the men who visited last night? Bring them to me !

They were there, they came forward, stammered out excuses: at night, could we realize? and yet they ran their hands well everywhere. The day before, they swore they hadn’t felt anything.

However, M. Cauche, who remained standing in the carriage, was taking notes in pencil for his report. He called Roubaud, whom he liked to frequent, both smoking cigarettes, along the quay, when he was strolling.

“Monsieur Roubaud, go upstairs, you will help me.”

And, when the deputy had stepped over the blood on the carpet, so as not to step into it:-

Look under the other cushion, see if nothing has slipped there.

He lifted the cushion, he searched, his hands cautious, eyes simply curious.

There is nothing.

But a stain on the padded sheet of the backrest caught his attention; and he pointed it out to the superintendent. Wasn’t that the bloody print of a finger? No, we ended up agreeing that it was a splash. The flood of people had approached, to follow this examination, scenting the crime, pressing behind the station master that a repugnance of retained on the step.

Suddenly, this one made a reflection.

“Tell me, Monsieur Roubaud, you were on the train… Were n’t you?” you made it home by express last night… You could perhaps give us some information!

—Here! it is true, cried the commissioner. Did you notice anything?

For three or four seconds Roubaud remained silent. He was down at the moment, examining the rug. But he got up almost immediately, answering in his natural voice, a little thick -

Certainly, certainly, I’ll tell you… My wife was with me. If what I know should be in the report, I would like her to come down, to check my memories with hers.

This seemed very reasonable to M. Cauche, and Pecqueux, who had just arrived, offered to go and fetch Madame Roubaud. He strode off, there was a moment of waiting. Philomène, who had come running with the driver, followed him with her eyes, irritated that he was taking on this commission. But, having seen Madame Lebleu, who was hurrying with all the speed of her poor swollen legs, she rushed forward and helped her; and the two women raised their hands to heaven, uttered exclamations, impassioned by the discovery of such an abominable crime. Although we still knew absolutely nothing, circulated around them in the bewilderment of gestures and faces. Dominating the buzzing of voices, Philomène herself, who had

no fault of his own, affirmed on her word of honor that Madame Roubaud had seen the murderer. And silence fell when Pecqueux reappeared, accompanied by the latter.

—See her then! murmured Madame Lebleu. If she looks like a sous chef's wife, with her princess air! This morning, before daybreak, she was already like this, combed and corseted as if she was going to visit.

It was with small regular steps that Severine came forward. There was a whole long end of the quay to follow, under the eyes that were watching coming; and she did not weaken, she simply pressed her handkerchief to her eyelids, in the great pain she had just experienced, on learning the name of the victim. Dressed in a very elegant black woolen dress, she seemed to be in mourning for her protector. Her heavy dark hair was glistening in the sun, for she hadn't even taken the time to cover her head, despite the cold. Her blue eyes so soft, full of anguish and drowned in tears, made her very touching.

"Of course she is right to cry," said Philomène in a low voice. There they are, now that their good Lord has been killed.

When Séverine was there, in the midst of all these people, in front of the open door of the coupé, M. Cauche and Roubaud got out; and, immediately, the latter began to say what he knew.

—Is not it? my dear, yesterday morning, as soon as we arrived in Paris, we went to see Monsieur Grandmorin… It might have been a quarter past eleven, could n't it?

He was staring at her, she repeated in a docile voice:

"Yes, a quarter past eleven."

But her eyes had come to rest on the blood-black cushion, she had a spasm, deep sobs bursting from her throat. And the station master, moved, eager, intervened:

—Madame, if you could not bear this spectacle… We understand your pain very well.

—Oh! just two words, interrupted the commissioner. We will then escort Madam home.

Roubaud hastened to continue:

"It was then, after having talked about various things, that Monsieur Grandmorin announced to us that he had to leave the next day, to go to Doinville, to his sister's… I can still see him seated at his office. I was here;

my wife was there… didn’t he, my dear, he told us he would leave the next day?”

—Yes, the next day.

M. Cauche, who continued to take quick notes in pencil, raised his head.

—How, the next day? but since he left in the evening!

—Wait a minute! replied the deputy. Even, when he knew that we were leaving again in the evening, he had the idea for a moment to take the express with us, if my wife would follow him as far as Doinville, where she would spend a few days with her sister, as it was. happened already. But my wife, who had a lot to do here, refused… didn’t you, you refused?

—I refused, yes.

—And there you have it, he was very nice… He took care of me, he accompanied us to the door of his office…

Isn’t he, my dear?

—Yes, to the door.

—In the evening, we left… Before settling in our compartment, I spoke with Monsieur Vandorpe, station. And I didn’t see anything at all. I was very bored, because I thought we were alone, and there was a lady in a corner whom I had not noticed; especially since two other people, a household, still went up at the last moment… Until Rouen either, nothing in particular, I saw nothing… Also, in Rouen, as we had gone down to stretch our legs, what was our surprise to see, three or four cars from ours, M. Grandmorin, standing at the door of a coupé! “How, Mr. President, did you leave?” “Ah! well, we hardly suspected we were traveling with you!” And he explained to us that he had received a dispatch. Whistled, “we quickly got back to our compartment, where, by the way, we did not find anyone, all our traveling companions having stopped in Rouen, which did not hurt us… There you go! that’s all, my dear, isn’t it?”

—Yes, that’s all.

This story, simple as it was, had greatly impressed the audience. Everyone was waiting to understand, their faces gaping. The commissioner, ceasing to write, expressed general surprise, asking:

“And are you sure that there was no one in the coupe, with Monsieur Grandmorin?”

—Oh! that, absolutely sure.

A shudder ran. This mystery that arose, blew from fear, a little chill that everyone felt pass on the back of their necks. If the traveler was alone, by whom could he have been murdered and thrown out of the coupe, three leagues away, before the train stopped again ?

In the silence, Philomène's evil voice was heard:-

It's funny all the same.

Feeling stared at her, Roubaud looked at her, with a nod of his chin, as if to say that he found that funny, too. Near her, he saw Pecqueux and Madame Lebleu, who were also nodding their heads. Everyone's eyes had turned to his side, we were waiting for something else, we were looking for a forgotten detail in his person, which would clarify the matter. There was no accusation, in those eagerly curious looks; and yet he thought he saw vague suspicion arise, this doubt which the smallest fact sometimes changes into certainty.

"Extraordinary," murmured M. Cauche.

"Quite extraordinary," repeated M. Dabadie.

So Roubaud made up his mind:

—What I am still quite sure of is that the express which goes, all at once, from Rouen to Barentin, went at its regular speed, without my noticing anything. abnormal… I say this, precisely because, finding us alone, I had lowered the mirror to smoke a cigarette; and I was glancing outside, I was perfectly aware of all the noises even, at Barentin, having recognized Monsieur Bessière on the platform, the station master, my successor, I called him, and we exchanged three words, while, mounted on the step, he hugged me hand… isn't it? my dear, we can question him, Monsieur Bessière will say so.

Severine, still motionless and pale, her thin face drowned in sorrow, once again confirmed her husband's statement.

—He will say it, yes.

From that moment, any accusation became impossible, if the Roubauds, who had gone back to Rouen, to their compartment, had been greeted there at Barentin by a friend. The shadow of suspicion that the sous-chef thought he saw pass in his eyes was gone. alley; and everyone's astonishment grew. The affair was taking an increasingly mysterious turn.

"Come on," said the superintendent, "are you quite certain that no one in Rouen was able to get into the coupe after you had left Monsieur

Grandmorin?”

Obviously, Roubaud had not foreseen this question, because, for the first time, he was troubled, no doubt no longer having the answer prepared in advance. He looked at his wife hesitantly.

—Oh! no, I don’t think so… We closed the doors, we whistled, we had just enough time to get back to our car… And then, the coupe was reserved, no one could get in, it seems to me…

But his wife’s blue eyes widened, grew so large, that he was afraid to be affirmative.

—After all, I don’t know… Yes, maybe someone could have come up… There was a real stampede…

And, as he spoke, his voice grew clearer, all this new story was born, asserted itself.

—You know, because of the Le Havre festivities, the crowd was enormous… We had to defend our compartment against second and even third class travelers… With that, the station is very poorly lit, we saw nothing, we pushed each other, we shouted, in the throng of departure… My faith! yes, it is very possible that, not knowing how to settle down, taking advantage of the congestion, someone forced himself into the coupe at the last second.

And, interrupting himself:

—Hey? my dear, that is what must have happened.

Severine, looking broken, her handkerchief over her bruised eyes, repeated:- That

is what happened, certainly.

From then on, the trail was given; and, without commenting, the supervisor and the station master exchanged a look with a knowing air. A long movement had stirred the crowd, who felt that the investigation was over, and that a need for comments tormented: immediately assumptions circulated, each had a story. For a while, the station service stood as if suspended, the entire staff was there, obsessed with this drama; and it was a surprise to see the nine thirty-eight train enter under the marchioness. We ran, the doors opened, the stream of travelers flowed away. Almost all the curious, moreover, had remained around the superintendent, who, out of the scruple of a methodical man, visited the bloodied coupe one last time.

Pecqueux, gesturing between Madame Lebleu and Philomène, at that moment saw his mechanic, Jacques Lantier, who had just got off the train and who, motionless, was watching the gathering from a distance. He called her violently with his hand. Jacques does was not moving. Finally, he made up his mind to take a slow walk.

—What? he asked his driver.

He knew very well, he only listened with a distracted ear to the news of the assassination and the assumptions that were made. What surprised him, moved him strangely, was to fall in the middle of this investigation, to find this coupe, glimpsed in the darkness, launched at full speed. He stretched out his neck, looked at the pool of curdled blood on the cushion; and he saw the scene of the murder again, he saw above all the corpse, stretched out across the way, over there, with its throat slit. Then, as he looked away, he noticed the Roubauds, while Pecqueux continued to tell him the story, how the latter were involved in the affair, their departure from Paris on the same train as the victim, the last words they had exchanged together in Rouen. The man, he knew him, to shake his hand, sometimes, since he was doing the express service; the woman, he had glimpsed her from time to time, he had moved away from her like the others, in his sickly fear. But at that moment, so weeping and pale, with the startled softness of her blue eyes under the black crushing of his hair, she hit him. He never took his eyes off her, and he was absent, he wondered, dazed, why he and the Roubauds were there, how the facts had been able to unite them in front of this crime car, them back from Paris the day before, him back from Barentin just now.

—Oh! I know, I know, he said out loud, interrupting the driver. I was just over there, out of the tunnel, last night, and I thought I saw something as the train passed.

It was a great emotion, all surrounded him. And he, the first, had shuddered, astonished, upset at what he had just said. Why had he spoken, after having promised himself so formally to be silent? So many good reasons advised him to remain silent! And the words were subconsciously came out of his lips as he looked at this woman. She had abruptly pushed aside her handkerchief, to fix her tearful eyes on him, which were still widening.

But the superintendent had quickly approached.

—What? what did you see?

And Jacques, under Séverine's motionless gaze, said what he had seen: the lighted coupé, passing through the night, at full steam, and the fleeing profiles of the two men, one upside down, the other with the knife in the dark. fist. Beside his wife, Roubaud listened, fixing her large, lively eyes on him.

"Then," asked the commissioner, "would you recognize the murderer?"

—Oh! that, no, I do not think so.

—Was he wearing an overcoat or a blouse?

—I could not say anything. Just think about a train that was supposed to run at a speed of eighty kilometers!

Severine, beyond her will, exchanged a glance with Roubaud, who had the strength to say:-

Indeed, one should have good eyes.

"Never mind," concluded M.Cauche, "here is an important statement. The examining magistrate will help you to see clearly in all that… Mr. Lantier and Mr. Roubaud, give me your very exact names, for the quotes."

It was over, the curious group gradually dissipated, the station service resumed its activity. Roubaud especially had to run to take care of the nine-fifty omnibus, in which travelers were already on board. He had given Jacques a handshake, more vigorous than usual; and the latter, left alone with Séverine, behind Madame Lebleu, Pecqueux and Philomène, who were going away whispering, had felt obliged to accompany the young woman under the marchioness, to the stairs of the employees, finding nothing to say to her, yet held close to her, as if a link had just been formed between them. Now the gaiety of the day had grown, the clear sun was rising victorious over the morning mists, in the great blue limpidity of the sky; while the sea wind, gaining strength with the rising tide, brought its salty freshness. And like he left her at last, he met her wide eyes again, the terrified and pleading softness of which had moved him so deeply.

But there was a soft whistle. It was Roubaud who gave the signal for departure. The machine responded with a prolonged whistle, and the nine-fifty train set off, rolled faster, disappeared into the distance, in the golden dust of the sun.

IV

That day, in the second week of March, Mr. Denizet, the examining magistrate, had summoned again to his office, at the Palais de Justice in Rouen, certain important witnesses of the Grandmorin affair.

For three weeks, this affair had made a huge noise. It had upset Rouen, it fascinated Paris, and the opposition newspapers, in the violent campaign they waged against the Empire, had just taken it as a war machine. The approach of general elections, the preoccupation of which dominated all politics, infuriated the struggle. There had been very stormy sessions in the Chamber: the one in which the validation of the credentials of two deputies attached to the person of the Emperor had been fiercely disputed; that again where one had been fiercely against the financial management of the prefect of the Seine, by demanding the election of a municipal council. And the Grandmorin affair was timely to continue the agitation, the most extraordinary stories circulated, the newspapers were filled every morning with new hypotheses, insulting to the government. On the one hand, it was suggested that the victim, a familiar with the Tuileries, a former magistrate, commander of the Legion of Honor, rich in millions, was addicted to the worst debauchery; on the other, the investigation not having succeeded until then, we began to accuse the police and the magistracy of convenience, we joked about this legendary assassin, who had remained untraceable. If there was a lot of truth to these attacks, they made it all the harder to bear.

Also, Mr. Denizet felt well all the heavy responsibility that weighed on him. He was also passionate about it, especially since he had ambition and eagerly awaited a case of this importance, to bring to light the high qualities of perspicacity and energy that he accorded himself… Son of a large Norman breeder, he had studied law in Caen and entered the magistracy quite late, where his peasant origin, aggravated by his father’s bankruptcy, had made his advancement difficult. Substitute for Bernay, Dieppe, Le Havre, he had taken ten years to become imperial prosecutor at Pont-Audemer. Then, sent to Rouen as a substitute, he had been an examining

magistrate for eighteen months, at the age of fifty. Without Fortune, ravaged by needs that his meager salaries could not satisfy, he lived in this dependence on the badly paid magistracy, accepted only by the mediocre, and where the intelligent devour each other, while waiting to sell themselves. He was of a very lively intelligence, very loose, even honest, having a love of his profession, intoxicated with his omnipotence, which made him, in his office as a judge, absolute master of the freedom of others. His interest alone corrected his passion, he had such a burning desire to be decorated and to go to Paris, that after having let himself be carried away, on the first day of instruction, by his love of the truth, he was now moving forward. with extreme prudence, guessing on all sides of the quagmires, in which his future could sink.

It must be said that Mr. Denizet had been warned, because, from the beginning of his investigation, a friend had advised him to go to Paris, to the Ministry of Justice. There, he had chatted at length with the Secretary General, Mr. Camy-Lamotte, a considerable personage, having the upper hand over the staff, in charge of appointments, in constant contact with the Tuileries. He was a handsome man, who had left like him as a substitute, but whom his acquaintances and his wife had had appointed deputy and grand officer of the Legion of Honor. The case had happened to him naturally in the hands, the imperial prosecutor of Rouen, worried about this shady drama in which a former magistrate happened to be the victim, having taken the precaution to refer it to the minister, who in turn had discharged himself to his secretary general. And, here, there was a meeting: Mr. Camy-Lamotte was precisely a former classmate of President Grandmorin, a few years younger, remained with him on a footing of friendship so close, that he knew him inside out., even in its vices. So he spoke of the tragic death of his friend with deep sorrow, and he had only told M. Denizet of his ardent desire to reach the culprit. But he wasn’t hiding that the Tuileries were sorry for all this disproportionate noise, he had taken the liberty of recommending much tact. In short, the judge understood that he would do well not to hurry, not to risk anything without prior approval. Even he had returned to Rouen with the certainty that, for his part, the secretary general had launched agents, eager to investigate the affair, too. We wanted to know the truth, to hide it better, if it was necessary.

However, days passed, and M. Denizet, in spite of his effort of patience, was irritated by the jokes of the press. Then the policeman reappeared, his nose in the wind, like a good dog. He was carried away by the need to find the true trail, by the glory of being the first to have scented it, even if it meant abandoning it, if ordered to do so. And while waiting for a letter, a piece of advice, a simple sign from the ministry, which was slow in coming, he had actively resumed his instruction. Out of two or three arrests already made, none could be sustained. But, suddenly, the opening of President Grandmorin's will aroused in him a suspicion, which he had felt touched from the very first hours: the possible guilt of the Roubauds. This testament, encumbered with strange bequests, contained one by which Séverine was instituted legatee of the house located at a place called Croix-de-Maufras.

From then on, the motive for the murder, vainly sought until then, was found: the Roubauds, knowing the legacy, had been able to assassinate their benefactor to enter into immediate enjoyment. This haunted him all the more since M. Camy-Lamotte had spoken singularly of Madame Roubaud, as having known her formerly at the President's house when she was a young girl. Only, what improbabilities, what material and moral impossibilities! Since directing his research in this direction, he stumbled at every step against facts that baffled his conception of a conventionally conducted judicial inquiry. Nothing was lit, the great central clarity, the first cause, illuminating everything, was missing.

Another track did exist, which M. Denizet had not lost sight of, the track provided by Roubaud himself, that of the man who, thanks to the rush at the start, could be mounted in the coupe. He was the famous, legendary, untraceable assassin about whom all the opposition newspapers chuckled. The effort of the instruction had initially focused on the description of this man, in Rouen from where he had left, in Barentin where he was to have gone down; but it was nothing specific, some witnesses even denied the possibility of the reserved coupe stormed, of contradictory. And the trail did not seem to have led to any good, when the judge, while questioning the guard-gate Misard, unwittingly came across the dramatic adventure of Cabuche and Louisette, this child who, abused by the president, would have gone to die. at his good friend's house. It was love at first sight for him, suddenly the classic indictment was formulated in his head. Everything was there, death threats made by the quarryman against the victim, deplorable

antecedents, a clumsily invoked alibi, impossible to prove. In secret, in a minute of energetic inspiration, he had, the day before, removed Cabuche from the little house he occupied at the bottom of the wood, a sort of lost den, where we had found bloodstained pants. And, while still defending himself against the conviction that invaded him, while promising himself not to let go of the Roubauds' hypothesis, he exulted at the idea that he alone had had a nose sharp enough to discover the real assassin… It was with the aim of making himself certain that he had summoned to his office that day several of the witnesses already heard, the day after the crime.

The examining magistrate's office was located on the rue Jeanne-d'Arc side, in the old dilapidated building, stuck to the side of the former palace of the Dukes of Normandy, now transformed into a Palace of Justice, which he dishonored. This large, gloomy room, situated on the ground floor, was lit by such a pale light that it was necessary to light a lamp there at three o'clock in winter. Wrapped in an old discolored green paper, it had for all furnishings two armchairs, four chairs, the judge's desk, the clerk's little table; and, on the cold fireplace, two bronze cups flanked a black marble clock. Behind the office, a door led to a second room, in which the judge sometimes hid the people he wanted to keep at his disposal; while the front door opened directly onto the wide corridor, lined with benches, where the witnesses.

From half past one, although the citation was only for two hours, the Roubauds were there. They had just arrived from Le Havre, they had barely taken the time to have lunch, in a small restaurant on the Grande-Rue. Both dressed in black, he in a frock coat, she in a silk dress, like a lady, retained the rather weary and sorrowful gravity of a household which has lost a relative. She had sat down on a bench, motionless, without a word, while, standing, his hands behind his back, he walked slowly in front of her. But on each return their eyes met, and their hidden anxiety then passed, like a shadow, over their silent faces. Even though he would have filled them with joy, the legacy of the Croix-de-Maufras had just revived their fears; for the president's family, especially his daughter, outraged by the strange donations, so numerous that they reached half of the total fortune, spoke of attacking the will; and Madame de Lachesnaye, urged on by her husband, was particularly harsh against her old friend Séverine, whom she loaded with the most serious suspicions. On the other hand, the thought of a proof,

which Roubaud had not thought of at first, now haunted him with a continuous fear: the letter he had had his wife write in order to persuade Grandmorin to leave., this letter that we would find, if this one does not hadn't destroyed it, and whose writing could be recognized. Fortunately, the days passed, nothing had happened yet, the letter must have been torn. Each new citation, in the office of the examining magistrate, nevertheless remained, for the household, a cause of cold sweats, under their correct attitude of heirs and witnesses.

Two o'clock struck. Jacques appeared in his turn. He had just arrived from Paris. Immediately, Roubaud stepped forward, his hand extended, very expansive.

—Ah! you too have been disturbed… Huh! is it boring, this sad affair that never ends!

Jacques, seeing Séverine, still seated, motionless, had just stopped dead. For three weeks, every two days, on each of his trips to Le Havre, the sous-chef showered him with attentions. Even once he had to accept lunch. And, near the young woman, he had felt himself shudder with her shudder, in growing confusion. Was he going to want that one too? Her heart was pounding, her hands were burning, only to see the white line of her neck, around the opening of the bodice. So he was now firmly resolved to flee her.

"And," continued Roubaud, "what do they say about the affair in Paris?" Nothing new, is it? You see, we don't know anything, we will never know anything… Come and say hello to my wife.

He dragged her away, Jacques had to come over, greet Séverine, embarrassed, smiling with her fearful child's air. He did his best to talk about indifferent things, under the gaze of the husband and wife who never left him, as if they had tried to read, even beyond his thoughts, in the vague musings in which he himself hesitated to come down. Why was he so cold? why did he seem to try to avoid them? Were his memories awakening, was it to confront them with him that they had been recalled? They would have liked to conquer this unique witness whom they dreaded, to attach to themselves by ties of such a close brotherhood that no longer found the courage to speak out against them.

It was the tortured sous-chef who returned to the business.

—So you don’t know why we are being quoted? Huh! maybe there is something new?

Jacques made a gesture of indifference.

—A noise was circulating earlier at the station when I arrived. We were talking about an arrest.

The Roubauds were astonished, very agitated, very perplexed. How, an arrest? no one had whispered a word to them! An arrest made, or an arrest to be made? They overwhelmed him with questions, but he knew no more.

At that moment, in the corridor, a sound of footsteps aroused Séverine’s attention.

“Here is Berthe and her husband,” she whispered.

They were, in fact, the Lachesnaye. They passed very stiff in front of the Roubauds, the young woman did not even glance at her former friend. And a bailiff ushered them straight into the examining magistrate’s office.

—Ah well! We must arm ourselves with patience, said Roubaud. We’re here for a good two hours… Sit down!

He himself had just placed himself to Séverine’s left, and with his hand he invited Jacques to stand on the other side, near her. The latter remained standing a moment longer. Then, as she looked at him with her gentle, fearful air, he let himself go on the bench. She was very frail between them, he felt her with submissive tenderness; and the slight warmth which emanated from this woman, during their long wait, slowly numbed her completely.

In Mr. Denizet’s office, the interrogations were about to begin. The instruction had already provided the material for an enormous file, several bundles of papers, covered with blue shirts. We had tried to follow the victim since his departure from Paris. Mr. Vandorpe, the station master, had left on the departure of the express at six-thirty, car 293 added at the last moment, the few words exchanged with Roubaud, who got into his compartment a little before the President Grandmorin, finally installing him in his coupe, where he was certainly alone. Then, the train conductor, Henri Dauvergne, questioned about what had happened in Rouen, during the ten-minute stop, could not say anything. He had seen the Roubauds chatting in front of the coupé, and he believed they had returned to their compartment, the door of which had been closed by an attendant; but it remained vague, amid the thrusts of the crowd and the semi-darkness of the station. As to

whether a man, the famous murderer who could not be found, had been able to throw himself into the coupe, when it was started up, he believed the adventure unlikely, while admitting the possibility; for it had, to his knowledge, already occurred twice. Other employees of the Rouen staff, also questioned on the same points, instead of shedding some light, had scarcely confused matters with their contradictory answers. However, a proven fact was the handshake given by Roubaud, from inside the wagon, to the station master of Barentin, mounted on the step: this station master, Mr. Bessière, had formally recognized it. as correct, and he had added that his colleague was alone with his wife, who, half lying down, seemed to be sleeping peacefully. On the other hand, we went so far as to look for travelers, left Paris in the same compartment as the Roubauds. The fat lady and the fat gentleman, who had arrived late, at the last minute, bourgeois from Petit-Couronne, had declared that, having dozed off immediately, they could not say anything; and as for the black woman, silent in her corner, she had dissipated like a shadow, it had been absolutely impossible to find her. Finally, there were other witnesses still, the little ones, those who had served to establish the identity of the travelers who went down that evening to Barentin, the man who had to stop there: we had counted the tickets, we had come to know all the travelers, except one, precisely a tall fellow, wrapped in a blue handkerchief, which some said was dressed in an overcoat and others in a blouse. Only on this man, disappeared, fainted like a dream, there were in the file three hundred and ten pieces, of such confusion, that each testimony was contradicted by another.

And the file was further complicated by legal documents: the official report drawn up by the clerk that the imperial prosecutor and the examining magistrate had taken to the scene of the crime, a full description of the location of the railway line. where the victim was lying, the position of the body, the costume, the objects found in the pockets, having allowed to establish identity; the doctor’s report, also brought in, a room where, in scientific terms, the throat wound, the only wound, was described at length, a terrible gash made with a sharp instrument, no doubt a knife; other reports still, other documents on the transport of the corpse to the hospital in Rouen, on the time it had remained there, before its remarkably rapid decomposition had forced the authority to return it to the hospital. family. But, of this new heap of paperwork, only two or three important points

remained. First, in the pockets, we had not found either the watch or a small wallet, where ten Thousand-franc bills, sum owed by President Grandmorin to his sister, Madame Bonnehon, and that she was waiting for. It would therefore have seemed that the crime had had theft as a motive, if on the other hand a ring, adorned with a large sparkle, had not remained on his finger. Hence again a whole series of hypotheses. Unfortunately, we did n't have the banknote numbers; but the watch was known, a very strong watch, with winding, bearing on the case the two interlaced initials of the president and in the interior a number of manufacture, the number 2516. Finally, the weapon, the knife of which the assassin had used, had given rise to considerable research, along the way, among the surrounding brush, wherever it might have been thrown; but they had remained useless, the assassin must have hidden the knife, in the same hole as the banknotes and the watch. They had only picked up, a hundred yards before Barentin station, the victim's travel blanket, left there like a compromising object; and it was among the exhibits.

When the Lachesnaye entered, M. Denizet, standing in front of his desk, was rereading one of the first interrogations, which his clerk had just found in the file. He was a short and fairly strong man, completely shaven, already graying. The The thick cheeks, the square chin, the broad nose, had a pale immobility, which was further increased by the heavy eyelids, half drooping over large light eyes. But all the sagacity, all the skill he thought he had, had taken refuge in his mouth, one of those comedian's mouths playing out their feelings in the city, of extreme mobility, and which was becoming thinner, in the minutes when it was getting very thin. The finesse most often lost him, he was too perceptive, he was too cunning with simple and good truth, according to a professional ideal, having made of his function a type of moral anatomist, endowed with second sight, extremely spiritual. Besides, he n'

He immediately showed himself to be kind to Madame de Lachesnaye, for there was still in him a worldly magistrate, frequenting society in Rouen and the surrounding area.

—Madam, please be seated.

And he gave the young woman a seat himself, a scrawny blonde, looking disagreeable and ugly, in her mourning clothes. But he was simply polite, even a little snappy in appearance, to M. de Lachesnaye, also blond

and frail; for this little man, a court adviser from the age of thirty-six, decorated, thanks to the influence of his father-in-law and the services his father, also a magistrate, had formerly rendered in the mixed commissions, represented in his eyes the magistracy of favor, the rich magistracy, the mediocre who settled down, certain of a rapid path by their kinship and their fortune; while he, poor, unprotected, found himself reduced to stretching out the eternal spine of the solicitor, under the ever-falling stone of advancement. So he was not sorry to make him feel, in this cabinet, his omnipotence, the absolute power he had over the liberty of all, to the point of changing a witness into a defendant in one word, and to proceed with his immediate arrest, if the fancy took it.

“Madam,” he continued, “you will forgive me for having to torture you again with this painful story. I know you as keenly as we do to see clarity come about and the culprit atone for his crime.”

He nodded to the clerk, a tall yellow boy with a bony face, and the questioning began.

But, from the first questions put to his wife, M. de Lachesnaye, who had sat down, seeing that they were not asking him, endeavored to take her place. He came to exhale all his bitterness against his stepfather’s will. Did we understand that? bequests so numerous, so important, that they reached almost half of the fortune, a fortune of three million seven hundred thousand francs! And to people we didn’t know not for the most part, to women of all classes! There was even a little violets seller, installed under a door in the rue du Rocher. It was unacceptable, he was waiting for the criminal investigation to be finished, to see if there would be no way to have this immoral will broken.

While he was grieving thus, his teeth clenched, showing the fool he was, the provincial with stubborn passions, sunk in avarice, M. Denizet looked at him with his big clear eyes, half hidden, and his mouth. fine expressed a jealous disdain for this helpless one whom two millions did not satisfy, and whom he would doubtless see one day under the supreme purple,

“I believe, sir, that you would be wrong,” he said at last. The will could only be attacked if the total bequest exceeded half of the fortune, and this is not the case.

Then, turning to his clerk:-

Say, Laurent, you’re not writing all this, I think.

With a weak smile, he reassured him, like a man who knew how to understand.

“But, in short,” replied M. de Lachesnaye, more bitterly, “one can not imagine, I hope, that I am going to leave the Croix-de-Maufras to these Roubauds. A gift like the daughter of a servant! And why, in what capacity? Then, if it is proven that they were involved in crime…”

Mr. Denizet returned to the case.

—Really, do you believe it?

—Lady! if they had knowledge of the will, their interest in the death of our poor father is demonstrated… Note, moreover, that they were the last to talk to him…

Anyway, it all seems very suspicious.

Impatient, disturbed in his new hypothesis, the judge turned to Berthe.

“And you madame, do you think your old friend capable of such a crime?”

Before answering, she looked at her husband. In a few months of cleaning, their bad grace, their drought to both had been communicated and exaggerated. They were spoiling each other, it was he who had thrown her on Séverine, to the point that, to to have the house back, she would have had him arrested on time -

My God! sir, she said at last, the person you are talking about had very bad instincts, being little.

—What? do you accuse him of behaving badly at Doinville?

—Oh! no, sir, my father wouldn’t have kept it.

In this cry, revolted the prudery of the honest bourgeois, who would never have a fault to reproach themselves with, and who prided themselves on being one of the most incontestable virtues of Rouen, hailed and received everywhere.

“Only,” she continued, “when there are habits of levity and dissipation… Well, sir, many things that I would not have believed possible, seem certain to me. today.”

Once again M. Denizet was impatient. He was no longer on this trail at all, and whoever remained there became his adversary, seemed to him to attack the security of his intelligence.

“Come, however, we must reason,” he cried. People like the Roubauds don’t kill a man like your father, to inherit faster; or, at the very least, there

would be indications of their haste, I would find elsewhere traces of this harshness to possess and to enjoy. No, the mobile is not enough, it would be necessary to discover another, and there is nothing, you do not bring anything yourselves… Then, reestablish the facts, do not you notice material impossibilities? No one saw the Roubauds get into the coupe, an employee even believes he can say that they have returned to their compartment. And, since they were there for sure at Barentin, it would be necessary to admit a comings and goings of their wagon to that of the president, from which three other cars separated them, this during the few minutes of the journey, when the train was launched at full speed. Is it likely? I questioned mechanics, drivers. They all told me that a great habit alone could give enough composure and energy… The wife would not have been one in any case, the husband would have risked himself without her; and for what to do, to kill a protector who had just saved them from a serious embarrassment? No, no, definitely! the hypothesis does not hold water, we must look elsewhere… Ah! a man who would have gone up to Rouen and gone down to the first station, who would have recently uttered death threats against the victim…

In his passion, he arrived at his new system, he was going to say too much, when the door, in opening himself up, let the bailiff's head pass. But, before the latter had uttered a word, a gloved hand finished opening the door wide; and a blonde lady entered, dressed in very elegant mourning, still beautiful at past fifty, of opulent beauty and strong aged goddess.

—It is I, my dear judge. I'm late, and you'll excuse me, won't you? The roads are impassable, the three leagues from Doinville to Rouen were well six today.

Gallantly M. Denizet stood up.

"Is your health good, madame, since last Sunday?"

"Very good… And you, my dear judge, have you recovered from the fear my coachman made you?" This boy told me that he almost spilled when he brought you back, barely two kilometers from the castle.

—Oh! a simple shake, I did not remember it already… Sit down, and as I said earlier to Madame de Lachesnaye, forgive me for awakening your pain with this appalling affair.

—My God! since it is necessary… Hello, Berthe! hello, Lachesnaye!

It was Madame Bonnehon, the victim’s sister. She had kissed her niece and shook hands with the husband. Widow, since the age of thirty, of a manufacturer who had brought her a large fortune, already very rich by herself, having shared the domain of Doinville with her brother, she had led a pleasant existence, full, they said, of favorites, but so correct and so frank in appearance, that it had remained the arbiter of Rouen society. By occasion and by taste, she had loved in the magistracy, receiving at the castle, for twenty-five years, the judiciary, all the people of the Palace that her carriages brought from Rouen and brought back there, in a continual celebration. Today, she had not yet calmed down, she was credited with maternal tenderness for a young substitute, the son of a court adviser, Mr. Chaumette: she worked for the advancement of the son, she fulfilled the father. invitations and attentions. And she had also kept a good friend from ancient times, a counselor as well, a bachelor, M. Desbazeilles, the literary glory of the court of Rouen, from whom finely turned sonnets were quoted. During years, he had had his room in Doinville. Now, although he was over sixty, he still came to dine there, like an old friend, whom his rheumatism only remembered. She thus preserved her royalty by her good grace, in spite of the threatening old age, and no one thought of disputing it with her, she had only felt a rival during the last winter, at Madame Leboucq’s, the wife of a counselor again, a tall brunette of thirty-four, really very well, where the magistracy was beginning to go a lot. This, in its usual playfulness, gave him a touch of melancholy.

“Then, madame, if you will allow it,” continued M. Denizet, “I will ask you a few questions.”

The interrogation of the Lachesnaye was over, but he did not dismiss them: his office, so dreary, so cold, turned into the social drawing room. The phlegmatic clerk prepared to write again.

—A witness spoke of a dispatch which your brother had received, calling him immediately to Doinville… We did not find any trace of this dispatch. Would you have written to him, lady?

Madame Bonnehon, very at ease, smiling, began to answer in the tone of a friendly chat.

—I did not write to my brother, I was expecting him, I knew he had to come, but without a date being fixed. Usually it fell like this, and almost always by a night train. As he lived in an isolated lodge in the park, opening

onto a deserted lane, we did not even hear him arrive. He rented a car from Barentin, he didn't show up until the next day, sometimes very late in the day, as well as a visiting neighbor, who had been living with him for a long time… If, this time, I was waiting for him, it was because he was to bring me a sum of ten thousand francs, a settlement of accounts between us. He certainly had the ten thousand francs on him.

That's why I always believed he was killed just to steal it.

The judge allowed a short silence to reign; then,

"What do you think of Madame Roubaud and her husband?"

She protested strongly.

—Ah! no, my dear Monsieur Denizet, you are not yet going to get lost on the account of these good people… Séverine was a good little girl, very gentle, very docile even, and delicious with that, which does not spoil anything. I think, since you want me to repeat it, that she and her husband are incapable of a bad deed.

He nodded his approval, he triumphed, casting a glance at Madame de Lachesnaye. The latter, stung, allowed herself to intervene.

—Aunt, I find you very easy.

Then Madame Bonnehon relieved herself, with her frankness. ordinary.

"Leave it alone, Berthe, we'll never come to an understanding on that. She was cheerful, she liked to laugh, and she was quite right… I know perfectly well what you and your husband are thinking. But, in truth, you have to be troubled by interest, for you to be so astonished at this bequest of the Croix-de-Maufras, made by your father to the good Séverine… He had raised her., he had endowed her, it was only natural that he put it in his will. Did he not consider her a little like his daughter, come on ! … Ah! my dear, money counts for so little in happiness!"

She, in fact, having always been very rich, showed herself absolute disinterestedness. Even, with the refinement of a beautiful adored woman, she affected to put the sole reason for living in beauty and in love.

"It was Roubaud who spoke of the dispatch," remarked M. de Lachesnaye dryly. If there was no dispatch, the president could not tell him that he had received one. Why did Roubaud lie?

"But," cried M. Denizet, excitedly, "the president may very well have invented this despatch to explain his sudden departure from the Roubauds." According to their own testimony, he was not to leave until the next day;

and, since he was on the same train as them, he needed some reason if he didn’t did not want to teach them the true reason, which we all ignore, moreover… It does not matter, it does not lead to anything.

A new silence fell. When the judge continued, he was very calm, he was very careful.

“Now, madame, I am approaching a particularly delicate subject, and I apologize for the nature of my questions. No one respects your brother’s memory more than I… There were rumors going around, right? They gave him mistresses.”

Madame Bonnehon had smiled again, with her infinite tolerance.

—Oh! dear sir, at his age! … My brother was widowed early, which he himself found good. So he lived as he liked, without me interfering in his existence. What I know is that he kept his rank, and that he remained a man of the best world to the end.

Berthe, suffocated at the mention of her father’s mistresses in front of her, had lowered her eyes; while her husband, as embarrassed as she was, had gone to stand in front of the window, turning his back.

“Forgive me if I insist,” said M. Denizet. Wasn’t there a story with a young maid in your house?

—Ah! yes, Louisette… But, dear sir, she was a vicious little girl who, at the age of fourteen, had relations with a resumed of justice. We wanted to exploit his death against my brother. It’s an indignity, I’ll tell you about it.

No doubt she was in good faith. Although she knew what to hold about the morals of the president, and that his tragic death did not surprise her, she felt the need to defend the high position of the family. Besides, in this unfortunate story of Louisette, if she believed him very capable of having wanted the child, she was also convinced of her precocious debauchery.

—Imagine a kid, oh! so small, so delicate, blonde and pink like a little angel, and sweet with that, with a sweetness of holy nitouche to give her the good Lord without confession… well, she was not fourteen when she was the good friend of a sort of brute, a quarryman named Cabuche, who had just served five years in prison, for having killed a man in a cabaret. This boy lived in the wild, on the edge of the Bécourt forest, where his father, who died of grief, had left him a hovel made of tree trunks and earth. He persisted in exploiting a corner of the abandoned quarries there, which in the past, I believe, provided half of the stones of which Rouen is built. And

it was at the bottom of this burrow that the little one was going to find her werewolf, of whom the whole country was so afraid, that he lived absolutely alone, like a plague victim. Often, met together, prowling through the woods, holding hands, she so cute, he huge and bestial. Finally, a debauchery not to be believed… Of course, I did not know these things until later. I had taken Louisette home almost out of charity, to do a good work. His family, those Misard, whom I knew to be poor, were careful not to tell me that they had beaten the child, without being able to prevent him from running to his Cabuche, as soon as a door remained open. And that's when the accident happened. My brother, in Doinville, had no servants of his own. Louisette and another woman were cleaning the out-of-the-way pavilion he occupied. One morning that was left alone, she disappeared. For me, she had planned her flight for a long time, perhaps her lover was waiting for her and had taken her away… But the terrible thing was that, five days later, the rumor of Louisette's death was running, with details of a rape, attempted by my brother, in such monstrous circumstances that the child, panicked, had gone to Cabuche's, it was said, to die of a cerebral fever. What had happened? so many versions have circulated that it is difficult to say. For my part, I believe that Louisette, who really died of a bad fever, as a doctor has observed, succumbed to some imprudence, nights under the stars, wandering in the swamps… Isn't it? my dear sir, you do n't see my brother torturing this kid. It's odious, it's impossible.

During this story, Mr. Denizet had listened attentively, neither approving nor disapproving. And Madame Bonnehon had a slight embarrassment to finish; then, deciding:-

My God! I am not saying that my brother did not want to joke with her. He loved youth, he was very cheerful, under his rigid appearance. Well, let's say he kissed her.

At this word, there was a modest revolt of the Lachesnaye.

—Oh! my aunt, my aunt!

But she shrugged her shoulders: why lie to justice?

—He kissed her, tickled her perhaps. There is no crime in this… And what makes me admit this is that the invention does not come from the quarry. Louisette must be the liar, the vicious one who swelled things up to be perhaps kept by her lover, so that the latter, a brute, I told you, ended up in good faith by imagining himself that his mistress had been killed for

him… He was really mad with rage, he repeated in all the cabarets that, if the president fell under his hands, he would bleed him like a pig…

The judge, silent until now. there, interrupted him sharply.

—He said that, will witnesses be able to confirm it?

—Oh! dear sir, you will find as many as you want… Well, a very sad affair, we had a lot of trouble. Fortunately, my brother's situation put him above all suspicion.

Madame Bonnehon had just understood what new trail M. Denizet was following; and she was quite worried about it, she preferred not to engage further, by questioning him in turn. He had stood up, he said he did not want to abuse the painful complacency of the family any longer. On his order, the registrar read the interrogations before having them sign them to the witnesses. They were perfectly correct, these interrogations, so carefully peeled unnecessary words and compromising, that Madame Bonnehon, pen in hand, had a look of benevolent surprise at this Laurent, pale, bony, whom she had not yet looked at.

Then, as the judge accompanied her, along with her nephew and her niece, to the door, she shook hands with him.

—See you soon, won't you? You know that you are always expected in Doinville… And thank you, you are one of my last faithful.

Her smile was veiled with melancholy, while her niece, dry, out the first, had only a slight greeting.

When he was alone, M. Denizet breathed for a minute. He had stopped, standing, thinking. For him, the affair became clear, there had certainly been violence on the part of Grandmorin, whose reputation was known. This rendered the instruction delicate, he promised himself to redouble his prudence until the advice he expected from the ministry had arrived. But he did not triumph any less. Finally, he held the culprit.

When he had resumed his place in front of the desk, he rang the usher.

—Bring in the Sieur Jacques Lantier.

On the bench in the hallway, the Roubauds were still waiting, with their faces closed, as if sleepy with patience, that a nervous tic sometimes stirred. And the voice of the usher, calling Jacques, seemed to wake them up, with a slight thrill. They followed him with their wide eyes, they watched him disappear to the judge. Then they fell back to their expectations, still paler, silent.

This whole affair, for three weeks, haunted Jacques with unease, as if it had ended up turning against him. This was unreasonable, for he had nothing to be ashamed of, not even for having remained silent; and yet he entered the judge's office only with the little thrill of the culprit, who fears seeing his crime discovered; and he defended himself against questions, he watched himself, for fear of saying too much. He too could have killed: couldn't that be read in his eyes? Nothing was more to him disagreeable that these legal citations, he felt a kind of anger, eager, he said, that one does not torment him any more, with stories which did not concern him.

Moreover, that day, Mr. Denizet insisted only on the description of the murderer. Jacques, being the only witness who had caught a glimpse of the latter, could alone give precise information. But he did not come out of his first deposition, he repeated that the scene of the murder had remained for him the vision of barely a second, an image so rapid, that it remained as formless, abstract, in his memory. It was only a man slaughtering another, and nothing more. During a half an hour, the judge, with slow obstinacy, harassed him, asked him the same question in every way imaginable: was he tall, was he short? Did he have a beard, did he have long or short hair? what sort of clothes was he wearing? what class did he seem to belong to? And Jacques, troubled, always gave only vague answers.

"Finally," asked M. Denizet abruptly, looking him in the eyes, "if they showed him to you, would you recognize him?"

He had a slight blink of the eyelids, overcome with anguish under this gaze which searched his head. His conscience wondered aloud.

—Recognize him… yes… maybe.

But already his strange fear of an unconscious complicity threw him back into his evasive system.

—No, however, I do not think so, I would never dare to affirm. Think about it! a speed of eighty kilometers per hour!

With a gesture of discouragement, the judge was about to send him to the next room, to keep him at his disposal, when he changed his mind.

—Stay, sit down.

And ringing the usher again:-

Introduce Monsieur and Madame Roubaud.

From the door, on seeing Jacques, their eyes dimmed with a flicker of worry. Had he spoken? Did we keep him to confront him with them? All

their confidence was gone, from it feel there; and it was in a somewhat muffled voice that they answered first. But the judge had simply resumed their first interrogation, they only had to repeat the same sentences, almost identical, while he listened to them, his head bowed, without even looking at them.

Then, all of a sudden, he turned to Séverine.

—Madam, you told the superintendent, whose minutes I have here, that, for you, a man had gone up to Rouen, in the coupe, as the train was moving.

She was stunned. Why was he recalling this? was it a trap? was he going, by reconciling his declarations, to make her contradict herself? Also, at a glance, husband, who intervened cautiously.

“I do not believe, sir, that my wife was so positive.”

—Pardon… As you emitted the possibility of the fact, madam said: “It is certainly what happened” … Well, madam, I wish to know if you had particular reasons for speaking thus.

She finished getting confused, convinced that, if she was not suspicious, he would, from answer to answer, lead her to a confession. Yet she couldn’t keep silent.

—Oh! no, sir, no reason… I must have said that as a simple reasoning, because indeed it is difficult to explain things in any other way.

“So you haven’t seen the man, can’t you tell us anything about him?”

—No, no, sir, nothing!

M. Denizet seemed to abandon this point of the investigation. But he returned to it immediately with Roubaud.

—And you, how is it that you did not see the man, if he really went up, because it results from your very testimony that you were still talking with the victim, when the whistle was whistled for departure ?

This insistence ended up terrifying the deputy station master, in his anxiety to know which course to take, to let go of man’s invention, or to persist in it. If there was any evidence against him, the hypothesis of was hardly sustainable and could even make his case worse. He waited to understand, he answered with confused explanations, at length.

“It is really unfortunate,” resumed M. Denizet, “that your recollections have remained so unclear, for you would help us to put an end to the suspicions which have wandered into various persons.”

This seemed so direct to Roubaud that he felt an irresistible need to clear himself. He saw himself discovered, his decision was taken immediately.

—There is such a case of conscience! We hesitate, you understand, nothing is more natural. When I confess to you that I think I saw it, man…

The judge made a gesture of triumph, believing he owed this beginning of frankness to his skill. He said he knew from experience the strange pain that certain witnesses have in confessing what they know; and he flattered himself that he was giving birth in spite of themselves.

—Speak then… How is he? small, large, approximately your size ?

—Oh! no, no, much bigger… At least I got the feeling, because it's just a simple sensation, an individual that I'm almost sure I brushed against, running back to my wagon.

"Wait," said M. Denizet.

And, turning to Jacques, he asked him:

"The man you saw, knife in hand, was he? taller than Monsieur Roubaud?"

The mechanic, who was growing impatient, for he was beginning to fear that he would not be able to catch the five o'clock train, raised his eyes and examined Roubaud; and he seemed never to have looked at him, he was astonished to find him short, powerful, with a singular profile, seen elsewhere, perhaps dreamed of.

"No," he whispered, "no taller, about the same height."

But the deputy station master protested vigorously.

—Oh! much larger, over the whole head at least.

Jacques remained with his eyes wide open on him; and, under this gaze, in which he read growing surprise, he stirred, as if to escape his own resemblance; while his wife, she also followed, frozen, the dull work of memory, expressed by the young man's face. Clearly, he was surprised at first at certain analogies between Roubaud and the assassin; then he had just become suddenly certain that Roubaud was the murderer, as the rumor had spread; then, now, he seemed completely in the emotion of this discovery, his face gaping, without it being possible to know what he was going to do, without knowing it himself. If he spoke, the household was lost. The Roubaud eyes had met hers, they both looked to the soul. There was a silence.

“Then you do not agree,” resumed M. Denizet. You saw him smaller, no doubt it was because he was bent over, in the struggle with his victim.

He too was looking at the two men. He hadn’t thought of using this confrontation like that; but, by professional instinct, he felt, at that moment, that the truth was passing through the air. His confidence in the Cabuche trail was even shaken. Would the Lachesnaye have been right? Are the culprits, against all likelihood, this honest employee and his young wife, so sweet?

“Did the man have his entire beard like you?” he asked Roubaud.

The latter had the strength to answer, without his voice trembling:

—His entire beard, no, no! No beard at all, I think.

Jacques understood that the same question was going to be asked of him. What would he say? for he would have sworn that the man wore his entire beard. In short, these people did not interest him, why not tell the truth? But, as he looked away from the husband, he met the gaze of the wife; and in that look he read such an ardent plea, such a complete gift from the whole person, that he was overwhelmed. His old thrill took hold of him again: did he love her then, was this the one he could love, as one loves with love, without a monstrous desire for destruction? And, at this moment, by a singular backlash of his confusion, it seemed to him that his memory was clouding, he no longer found the assassin in Roubaud. The vision became vague again, a doubt seized him, to the point that he would have mortally repented of having spoken.

M. Denizet asked the question:

“Did the man have his entire beard, like M. Roubaud?”

And he replied in good faith:

“Sir, in truth, I cannot say. Again, it was too quick. I don’t know anything, I don’t want to assert anything.

But M. Denizet persisted, for he wanted to put an end to the suspicion about the sous-chef. He pushed the latter, he pushed the mechanic, succeeded in obtaining from the first a complete report of the murderer, tall, strong, without beard, dressed in a blouse, quite the opposite of his own description; while he drew from the second only evasive monosyllables, which gave strength to the statements of the other. And the judge returned from there to his first conviction: he was on the right track, the portrait which the witness made of the murderer was found to be so exact, that each

new line added to the certainty. It was this household, unjustly suspected, which, by its overwhelming testimony, would make the culprit fall.

“Enter there,” he said to the Roubauds and Jacques, making them pass into the next room, when they had signed their interrogations. “Wait till I call you.”

Immediately he gave the order that the prisoner be brought in; and he was so happy that he, with his clerk, pushed his good humor so far as to say:

“Laurent, we have him.”

But the door had opened, two gendarmes had appeared, leading a tall boy of twenty-five to thirty years old. They withdrew at a sign from the judge, and Cabuche remained alone in the middle of the cabinet, bewildered, with the tawny bristle of a hunted animal. He was a fellow, with a powerful neck, enormous fists, fair-haired, very white-skinned, a sparse beard, barely a golden down that curled, silky. The massive face, the low forehead said violence of the limited being, all with immediate sensation; but there was something like a need for tender submission, in the wide mouth and square nose of a good dog. Seized brutally at the bottom of his hole, early in the morning, torn from his forest, exasperated by the accusations he did not understand, he already had, with his dismay and his torn blouse, the suspicious look of the defendant, that air of a bandit. cunning that prison gives to the most honest man. Night was falling, the room was dark, and he was retreating into the shadows, when the usher brought a large lamp, with a naked globe, the bright light of which lit up his face. Then, uncovered, he remained motionless.

Immediately M. Denizet had fixed on him his large, clear eyes with heavy lids. And he did not speak, it was the silent engagement, the first test of his power, before the savage war, a war of tricks, traps, moral tortures. This man was the culprit, everything was becoming lawful against him, he only had the right to confess his crime.

The interrogation began, very slow.

—Do you know what crime you are accused of?

Cabuche, his voice thick with powerless anger, growled:

“No one told me, but I suspect it.” We have talked enough!

—Did you know Monsieur Grandmorin?

—Yes, yes, I knew him, too!

—A daughter Louisette, your mistress, has entered Madame Bonnehon's as a chambermaid.

A burst of rage swept over the quarryman. In anger, he saw red.

—For God Sake! those who say that are bloody liars. Louisette was not my mistress.

Oddly enough, the judge had watched him get angry. And, putting an end to the questioning:-

You are very violent, you were sentenced to five years in prison for having killed a man, in a quarrel.

Cabuche lowered his head. It was his shame, this condemnation. He murmured: "He had typed the first… I was only four years old, I was pardoned for one year."

"So," continued M. Denizet, "you claim that the girl Louisette was not your mistress?"

Again he clenched his fists. Then, in a low, interrupted voice :

—So understand, she was a kid, not yet fourteen, when I came back from there… So everyone was running away from me, they would have thrown stones at me… And she, in the forest, where I always met her, she approached, she chatted, she was nice, oh! nice… So we became friends like that. We were holding hands as we walked around. It was so good, so good, back then! … Of course she was growing up and I was thinking of her. I can't say the on the contrary, I was like a madman, so much I loved him. She loved me very much too, and that would have ended up happening, what you say, when they separated her from me, by putting her in Doinville, at that lady's… Then, one evening, on returning from home. career, I found her outside my door, half mad, so damaged that she was burning with fever. She hadn't dared to go back to her parents, she was coming to die with me… Ah! name of God, the pig! I should have run to bleed him right away!

The judge pursed his thin lips, astonished at this man's sincere accent. Decidedly, he had to play tight, he was dealing with a stronger part than he had expected.

—Yes, I know the terrible story that you and that girl made up. Note only that Mr. Grandmorin's whole life put him above your accusations.

Distraught, round eyes, trembling hands, the quarryman stammered:—What? what have we invented? … It is the others who lie, and it is us who

are accused of lying!

—But yes, do not act innocent… I have already questioned Misard, the man who married your mistress' mother. I will confront him with you, if necessary. You will see what he thinks of your story, him… And be careful of your answers. We have witnesses, we know everything, you would do better to tell the truth.

It was his usual intimidating tactic, even when he knew nothing and had no witnesses.

"So will you deny that you publicly shouted everywhere that you would bleed Monsieur Grandmorin?"

—Ah! that, yes, I said it. And I said it with a good heart, come on! because my hand was itchy!

A surprise stopped Mr. Denizet, who expected a system of complete denial. How? "Or" What! the defendant confessed his threats. What trick was it hiding? Fearing he had gone too quickly, he collected himself for a moment, then stared at him, asking him this abrupt question:

—What did you do during the night of February 14th to 15th?

"I went to bed at night, around six o'clock… I was a little unwell, and my cousin Louis even did me the service of driving a load of stones to Doinville."

—Yes, we saw your cousin, with the car, cross the track, at the level crossing. But your cousin, when questioned, could only answer one thing: it was that you left him around noon and he never saw you again… Prove to me that you were in bed at six o'clock.

—Come on, it's stupid, I can't prove that. I live in a house on my own, on the edge of the forest… I was there, I say it, and that's it.

Then M. Denizet decided to strike the blow of the affirmation which is essential. Her face froze in a tension of will, as her mouth played the scene.

—I will tell you, me, what you did, on the evening of February 14 … At three o'clock, you took the train from Barentin to Rouen, for a purpose that the instruction did not have. could still establish. You were supposed to come back by train from Paris which stops in Rouen at three past nine; and you were on the quay, in the middle of the crowd, when you saw Monsieur Grandmorin, in his coupe. Notice that I admit very well that there was no ambush, that the idea of the crime only came to you then… You climbed thanks to the scramble, you waited to be under the Malaunay tunnel; but

you miscalculated the time, because the train was coming out of the tunnel, when you did the blow… And you threw the corpse, and you got off at Barentin, after also getting rid of the travel blanket… that's what you did.

He was watching the slightest waves on Cabuche's rosy face, and he was annoyed when the latter, very attentive at first, finally burst out into a good laugh.

"What are you talking about? … If I had done it, I would say it."

Then, quietly:

—I didn't do it, but I should have done it. For God Sake! yes, I regret it.

And M. Denizet could not get anything else out of it. In vain, he resumed his questions, returned to the same points ten times, using different tactics. No! still no! it wasn't him. He shrugged his shoulders, found it stupid. While stopping him, they had searched the hovel, without discovering either the weapon, the ten banknotes, or the watch; but a few droplets of blood had been seized on a pair of pants, overwhelming evidence. From new, he began to laugh again a beautiful story, a rabbit caught in a snare which bled him on the legs! And, in his fixed idea of the crime, it was the judge who was losing his footing, by too much professional finesse, complicating, going beyond the simple truth. This narrow-minded man, incapable of a cunning struggle, of invincible strength when he said no, always no, gradually threw him beside himself; for he only admitted him guilty, each new denial outraged him more, like stubbornness in savagery and lies. He would force him to cut himself.

—So you deny it?

—Of course, since it's not me… If it was me, ah! I'd be too proud of it, I would say.

With a sudden movement, M. Denizet got up and went himself to open the door to the small adjoining room. And, when he had called Jacques back:

—Do you recognize this man?

"I know him," replied the surprised mechanic. I saw it once, at the Misards.

—No, no… Do you recognize him for the man in the wagon, the murderer?

Suddenly, Jacques became wary again. Besides, he did n't recognize him. The other had seemed shorter, darker. He was about to declare it, when

he found that it was too much to step forward. And he remained evasive.

—I do not know, I cannot say… I assure you, sir, that I cannot say.

M. Denizet, without delay, called the Roubauds in their turn. And he asked them the question:

“Do you recognize this man?”

Cabuche was still smiling. He was not surprised, he nodded to Séverine, whom he had known as a young girl, when she lived in Croix-de-Maufras. But she and her husband just had a shock, seeing him there. They understood: it was the arrested man Jacques had told them about, the defendant who had motivated their new interrogation. And Roubaud was amazed, frightened by the resemblance of this boy to the imaginary assassin, whose description he had invented, the opposite of his own. It happened to be purely fortuitous, he was so disturbed that he hesitated to answer.

—Come on, do you recognize him?

—My God! mr. judge, I repeat it to you, it was a simple sensation, an individual who brushed against me… No doubt, this one is tall like the other, and he is blond, and he no beard…— Finally, do you recognize him?

The deputy, oppressed, was trembling with a dull internal struggle. The instinct of self-preservation won out.

—I can’t say. But there’s a lot of that, for sure.

This time Cabuche began to swear. In the end, we annoyed him with these stories. Since it wasn’t him, he wanted to leave. And, under the flow of blood which rose to his head, he clapped his fists, he became so terrible that the gendarmes, recalled, took him away. But, in the face of this violence, this leap of the attacked beast throwing itself forward, M Denizet triumphed. Now his conviction was made, and he let it be seen.

—Did you notice his eyes? Me, it is in the eyes that I recognize them… Ah! his account is good, it is ours!

The Roubauds, motionless, looked at each other. So what? it was over, they were saved, since justice held the culprit. They remained a little stunned, with a painful awareness of the role that the facts had just forced them to play. But a joy flooded them, swept away their scruples, and they smiled at Jacques, they waited, relieved, thirsty for the fresh air, for the judge. dismissed them all when the bailiff brought a letter to the latter.

Quickly, M. Denizet had returned to his desk, to read it carefully, forgetting the three witnesses. It was the letter from the ministry, the advice that he should have had the patience to wait for, before pushing the investigation again. And what he was reading was bound to put an end to his triumph, for his face gradually froze, resumed its gloomy immobility. At one point he raised his head, glanced sideways at the Roubauds, as if their memory had come back to him, at one of the sentences. The latter, losing their brief joy, relapsed into their discomfort, felt themselves taken back. Why had he looked at them? In Paris, had we found the three lines of writing, that clumsy note whose fear haunted them? Séverine knew M. Camy-Lamotte well, having often seen him at the president's house, and she knew that he was responsible for putting the deceased's papers in order. Roubaud was tortured with bitter regret, that of not having dared to send his wife to Paris, who would have made useful visits, who would at least have ensured the protection of the Secretary General, in the event that the Company, bored. bad noises, would think of removing him. And both never took their eyes off the judge, feeling their anxiety growing as they saw him darken, visibly disconcerted by this letter, which disturbed all his good work of the day.

Finally, M. Denizet let go of the letter, and he remained absorbed for a moment, his eyes open on the Roubauds and on Jacques. Then, resigning himself, speaking aloud to himself:-

Well! we'll see, we'll take it all over again… You can withdraw.

But, as the three were leaving, he could not resist the need to know, to clarify the serious point which was destroying his new system, although he was advised to do nothing more, without a prior agreement.

—No, you, stay a moment, I have one more question for you.

In the corridor, the Roubauds stopped. The doors were open, and they could not leave: something was holding them there, the anguish of what was going on in the judge's office, the physical impossibility of leaving, until they learned Jacques the question he was still being asked. They came back, they stomped, their legs broken. And they found themselves side by side on the bench, where they had already waited for hours, they weighed down, silent.

When the mechanic reappeared, Roubaud stood up painfully.

—We were expecting you, we will go back to the station together… Well?

But Jacques turned his head away, embarrassed, as if he wanted to avoid Séverine’s gaze, fixed on him.

“He doesn’t know anymore, he’s floundering,” he said at last. Now, he asked me if there weren’t two doing the job. And, as I spoke, in Le Havre, of a black mass weighing down on the old man’s legs, he asked me about it… He seems to believe that it was only the blanket. So he sent for the blanket, and I had to say… My God! yes, that was the cover, maybe.

The Roubauds shuddered. We were on their trail, a word from this boy could ruin them. He surely knew, he would end up talking. And all three, the woman between the two men, were leaving the courthouse in silence, when the sous-chef continued in the street:

“By the way, comrade, my wife will be forced to go and spend one day in Paris on business.” You will be very kind to fly her, if she needs someone.

V

At eleven fifteen, the exact time, the post of the Pont de l'Europe signaled, with the two regulatory sounds of a horn, the express of Le Havre, which emerged from the Batignolles tunnel; and soon the turntables were shaken, the train entered the station with a short whistle, squealing on the brakes, smoking, dripping, drenched by a driving rain whose deluge did not cease from Rouen.

The crew had not yet turned the door latches, one of them opened and Séverine jumped quickly onto the platform, before stopping. Her wagon was in the tail, she had to hurry to get to the machine, in the midst of the sudden flood of travelers, descended from the compartments, in an embarrassment of children and packages. Jacques was there, standing on the platform, waiting to return to the depot; while Pecqueux was wiping some brass with a cloth.

"So that's understood," she said, tiptoeing. I will be rue Cardinet at three o'clock, and you will be kind enough to introduce me to your boss, so that I thank him.

This was the pretext imagined by Roubaud, a thank you to the head of the Batignolles depot, following a vague service rendered. In this way, she would find herself entrusted to the good friendship of the mechanic, she could tighten the bonds more, act on him.

But Jacques, charcoal black, soaked in water, exhausted from having struggled against the rain and the wind, looked at her with hard eyes, without answering. He had not been able to refuse the husband when he left Havre; and the idea of being alone with her overwhelmed him, for he felt he wanted her now.

—Is not it? she resumed smiling, with her soft caressing gaze, despite the surprise and the little loath she was trying to find him so dirty, barely recognizable, wasn't he? I count on you.

As she had risen again, resting her gloved hand on an iron handle, Pecqueux obligingly warned her.

—Be careful, you will get dirty.

So Jacques had to answer. He did so gruffly.

—Yes, rue Cardinet… Unless this hellish rain has melted me. What a time dog!

She was touched by the miserable state he was in, she added, as if he had suffered only for her:

—Oh! are you done, and when I was so good, me! … You know that I thought of you, it made me despair, this deluge… me Who was so happy, at the idea that you brought me this morning, and that you would bring me back this evening, by express!

But this gentle familiarity, so tender, seemed only to trouble him more. He looked relieved, when a voice shouted, “Back!” With a quick hand, he pulled the rod of the whistle, while the driver waved away the young woman.

—At three o’clock!

—Yes, at three o’clock!

And, while the machine was restarting, Séverine left the quay, the last. Outside, in the rue d’Amsterdam, as she was about to open her umbrella, she was happy to see that it had stopped raining. She went down to the place of Havre, consulted herself for a moment, finally decided that she had better have lunch right away. It was twenty-five past eleven. She went into a broth at the corner of rue Saint-Lazare, where she ordered fried eggs and a chop. Then, while eating very slowly, she relapsed into the reflections that had haunted her for weeks, her face pale and blurred, no longer having her docile smile of seduction.

It was the day before, two days after their interrogation in Rouen, that Roubaud, judging it dangerous to wait, had resolved to send him to pay M. Camy-Lamotte a visit, not to the ministry, but to his home, rue du Rocher, where he occupied a hotel, neighbor of the Grandmorin hotel. She knew she would find him there at one o’clock, and she was in no hurry, she was preparing what she would say, trying to predict what he would answer, so as not to be disturbed. The day before, a new cause for anxiety had just hastened his trip: they had learned, through gossip from the station, that Madame Lebleu and Philomène were everywhere telling how the Company was going to send Roubaud away, deemed compromising; and the worst was that Mr. Dabadie, directly questioned, had not said no, which gave

much weight to the news. It was therefore urgent that she should run to Paris to plead their cause and above all ask for the protection of the powerful figure, as in the past that of the president. But beneath this request, which would at least serve to explain the visit, there was a more compelling motive, a stinging and insatiable need to know, this need which drives the criminal to surrender rather than to ignore. Uncertainty was killing them, now that they felt discovered, ever since Jacques had told them of the suspicion or the charge seemed to be of a second assassin. They exhausted themselves with conjectures, the letter found, the facts re-established; from hour to hour they expected searches, an arrest; and their torment worsened so much, the the smallest facts around them assumed an air of such disturbing menace that they ended by preferring catastrophe to these continual alarms. Have a certainty, and no longer suffer.

Severine finished her chop, so absorbed, that she woke up as if with a start, amazed at the public place where she was. Everything was becoming bitter to her, the pieces did not pass, and she did not even have the heart to take coffee. But even though she had eaten slowly, it was barely a quarter past twelve when she left the restaurant. Still three quarters of an hour to kill! She who adored Paris, who loved so much to run the pavement, freely, the rare times she came there, she was there. felt lost, fearful, in an impatience to be done and to hide. The sidewalks were already drying, a warm wind was finishing sweeping the clouds. She walked down the rue Tronchet, found herself at the Madeleine flower market, one of those March markets, so flowered with primroses and azaleas, in the pale days of the closing winter. For half an hour, she walked in the middle of this hasty spring, taken up again by vague musings, thinking of Jacques as an enemy, whom she had to disarm. It seemed to him that his visit to the rue du Rocher was over, that all was going well on that side, that he only had to obtain the boy’s silence; and it was a complicated business, where she lost, his head worked with romantic plans. But it was without fatigue, without fear, with a rocking softness. Then, abruptly, she saw the time on a kiosk clock: ten past one. Her race was not done, she relapsed hard into the anguish of reality, she hastened to go up towards the rue du Rocher.

M. Camy-Lamotte’s hotel was at the corner of this street and the rue de Naples; and Séverine had to pass in front of the Grandmorin hotel, silent, empty, the shutters closed. She looked up, she quickened her pace. The

memory of his last visit came back to him, this great house stood up, terrible. And, as, at some distance, she turned from instinctively, looking back, like a person pursued by the loud voice of a crowd, she saw, on the sidewalk opposite, the examining magistrate of Rouen, M. Denizet, who was also walking up the street. She was seized with it. Had he noticed her, glancing around the house? But he walked quietly, she let herself get ahead of him, followed him in great confusion. And, again, she received a blow to the heart when she saw it ringing at the corner of the rue de Naples, at M. Camy-Lamotte's.

Terror had seized her. She would never dare to come in now. She turned around, walked down the rue d'Édimbourg, went down to the Pont de l'Europe. Only there, sheltered. And, not knowing where to go or what to do, bewildered, she stood motionless against one of the balustrades, looking below her, through the metal frames, at the vast field of the station, where trains were constantly moving. She followed them with her bewildered eyes, she thought that, surely, the judge was there for the case, and that the two men were talking about her, that her fate was decided, at the very moment. So, overcome with despair, the urge tormented her, rather than returning to rue du Rocher, to throw herself immediately under a train. There was just one coming out of the Marquise des Outlines, which she watched coming, and which passed under her, breathing up to his face a warm whirlwind of white vapor. Then the stupid uselessness of her journey, the dreadful anguish she would win, if she did not have the energy to seek certainty, presented themselves to her mind with so much force that she gave herself to herself. five minutes to regain your courage. Of machinery whistled, she followed a small, unplugging a commuter train; and, her gaze having been raised to the left, she recognized, above the cour des messageries, at the top of the house in the Amsterdam impasse, Mother Victoire's window, this window where she was standing. recollected her elbows with her husband, before the abominable scene which had caused their misfortune. It evoked the danger of her situation, in a rush of pain so acute, that she suddenly felt ready to face anything, to end it. Trunk sounds, prolonged rumblings deafened him, while thick smoke barred the horizon, soaring against the great clear sky of Paris. And she resumed her way to the rue du Rocher, going there as one commits suicide, hastening her walk, suddenly afraid of finding no one there.

When Séverine had pulled the button of the bell, a new terror froze her. But, already, a servant made her sit down in an anteroom, after having taken her name. And, through the doors gently ajar, she heard very distinctly the lively conversation of two voices. Silence had fallen, deep, absolute. She could only make out the dull beating of her temples, she said to herself that the judge was still in conference, that they were going to make her wait a long time, no doubt; and this expectation became intolerable to him. Then, all of a sudden, she had a surprise: the valet called her and introduced her. Certainly the judge had not come out. She guessed it there, hidden behind a door.

It was a large study, with black furniture, lined with a thick carpet, heavy doors, so severe and so closed, so that not a noise from outside entered. Yet there were flowers, pale roses, in a bronze basket. And it indicated like a hidden grace, a lovable taste of life, behind this severity. The master of the house was standing, very properly tightened in his frock coat, also severe, with his slender face, which his graying whiskers widened a little, but with the elegance of an old handsome, remained slender, with a distinction that one could feel smiling, beneath the desired stiffness of the official dress. In the half-light of the room, he looked very tall.

Séverine, on entering, was oppressed by the warm air, suffocated under the hangings; and she saw only M. Camy-Lamotte, who was watching her approach. He made no move to invite her to sit down, he made an affectation not to open his mouth first, waiting for her to explain the reason for his visit. This prolonged the silence; and, by the effect of a violent reaction, she suddenly found herself mistress of herself in peril, very calm, very prudent.

“Sir,” she said, “you will excuse me if I have the courage to come and call me back to your kindness.” You know the irreparable loss that I made, and in the abandonment where I find myself now, I dared to think of you to defend us, for us continue a bit of the protection of your friend, of my protector so regretted.

M. Camy-Lamotte then could only make her sit down, with a gesture, for it was said in a perfect tone, without exaggeration of humility or sorrow, with an art innate to feminine hypocrisy. But he still didn’t speak, he had sat down himself, still waiting. She continued, seeing that she had to clarify.

—I allow myself to refresh your memories by reminding you that I had the honor of seeing you at Doinville. Ah! it was a happy time for me! … Today the bad days have arrived, and I have only you, sir, I implore you in the name of the one we lost. You who loved him, complete his good work, replace him with me.

He listened to her, he looked at her, and all his suspicions were shaken, she seemed so natural to him, charming in her regrets and in her supplications. The note discovered by him, in the midst of Grandmorin's papers, these two unsigned lines, had seemed to him to be only from her, whose complacency he knew for the president; and, just now, the mere announcement of his visit had convinced him. He had only just interrupted his interview with the judge to confirm his certainty. But how to believe her guilty, to see so, so peaceful and so sweet?

He wanted to have a clear understanding of it. And, while keeping his air of severity:

"Explain yourself, madame… I remember perfectly, I ask nothing better than to be of use to you, if nothing stands in the way."

So, very clearly, Séverine told how her husband was threatened with dismissal. He was very jealous of him, because of his merit and the high protection which had hitherto covered him. Now that we believed him to be defenseless, we hoped to triumph, we redoubled our efforts. She did not name anyone, moreover; she spoke in measured terms, despite the imminent danger. So that Paris, she had to be fully convinced of the need to act as quickly as possible. Perhaps the next day would be too late: it was immediately that she called for help and help. All of this with such an abundance of logical facts and good reasons that it seemed in truth impossible that she had bothered herself for any other purpose.

M. Camy-Lamotte studied even the little imperceptible beats of his lips; and he struck the first blow:

"But why should the Company dismiss your husband?" She has nothing serious to reproach him with.

She too didn't take her eyes off him, watching the smallest folds in his face, wondering if he had found the letter; and, despite the innocence of the question, it was suddenly a conviction, with her, that the letter was there, in a piece of furniture in that cabinet: he knew, for he was setting a trap for her, wishing to see if she would dare to speak of the real reasons for the

referral. Besides, he had accentuated the tone too much, and she had felt searched to the soul by his pale eyes of a tired man.

Bravely, she walked in peril.

—My God! sir, it is very monstrous, but we have been suspected of having killed our benefactor, because of this unfortunate testament. We had no difficulty in demonstrating our innocence. Only there is always something left these abominable accusations, and the Company doubtless fears scandal.

He was again surprised, taken aback, by this frankness, especially by the sincerity of the accent. Besides, having judged her, at first glance, of a mediocre figure, he was beginning to find her extremely attractive, with the complacent submission of her blue eyes, under the dark energy of her hair. And he thought of his friend Grandmorin, seized with a jealous admiration: how the devil this fellow, his senior by ten years, had he had such creatures until his death, when he already had to give up these toys, so as not to lose the rest of his marrow? She was really very charming, very shrewd, and he let the smile of the now disinterested amateur shine through, under the cold air of a civil servant, having such an unfortunate affair on his hands.

But Séverine, with the bravado of a woman who feels her strength, was wrong to add:-

People like us don’t kill for money. There should have been another motive, and there was none, a motive.

He looked at her, saw the corners of her mouth quiver. It was her. From then on, his conviction was absolute. And she understood immediately that she had indulged, the way he had stopped smiling, his chin nervously pinched. She felt a failure, as if his whole being was abandoning him. Yet she remained with her chest upright in her chair, she heard her voice continue to chat in the same even tone, saying the right words. The conversation continued, but now they had nothing more to learn; and under whatever words they both spoke only of things which they did not say. He had the letter, she had written it. It even came out of their silences.

“Madame,” he resumed at last, “I do not refuse to intervene with the Company, if you are really worthy of interest.” I’m just waiting for the COO tonight, for another business… Only I would need a few notes. Hold! Write me your husband’s name, age, service record, and anything that can tell me about your situation.

And he pushed a little pedestal table in front of her, ceasing to look at her, so as not to frighten her too much. She had shuddered: he wanted a page of her handwriting, in order to compare it to the letter. For a moment she desperately searched for a pretext, determined not to write. Then she thinks: what's the point? since he knew. We would always have a few lines from her. Without any apparent disturbance, in the simplest manner in the world, she wrote down what he asked; while, standing behind she recognized the handwriting perfectly, higher, less shaky than the note on the note. And he ended up finding her very brave, that slender little woman; he was smiling again, now that she could not see him, his man's smile that charm alone still touched, in his experienced carelessness of all things. Basically, nothing was worth the fatigue of being fair. He only looked after the decor of the regime he served.

—Well! madam, give me that, I will inform myself, I will act for the best.

—I am very grateful to you, sir… Then you will obtain my husband's maintenance, I can consider the matter as settled?

—Ah! for example no! I'm not committing myself to anything… I have to see, that I think.

In fact, he was hesitant, he did not know what part he was going to take with regard to the household. And she had only one anxiety, since she felt at his mercy: this hesitation, the alternative of being saved or lost by him, without being able to guess the reasons which would decide it.

—Oh! sir, think of our torment. You won't let me go, until you give me certainty.

—My God! yes, madam. I can't help it. Wait.

He pushed her towards the door. She was leaving, desperate, upset, on the verge of confessing everything out loud, in a immediate need to force him to say clearly what he intended to do with them. To stay a minute longer, hoping to find a detour, she exclaimed:

—I forgot, I wanted to ask you for some advice, about this unfortunate testament… Do you think we should refuse the bequest?

"The law is for you," he replied cautiously. It is a matter of appreciation and of circumstance.

She was on the threshold, she made a last effort.

"Sir, I beg you, don't let me go like that, tell me if I must hope."

With a gesture of abandonment, she had taken his hand. He pulled away. But she looked at him with beautiful eyes, so fiery prayer, that he was stirred.

—Well! come back at five o'clock. Maybe I will have something to tell you.

She left, she left the hotel, even more distressed than she had come there. The situation had become clearer, and his fate remained in suspense, under the threat of perhaps immediate arrest. How to live until five o'clock? The thought of Jacques, which she had forgotten, suddenly awoke in her: another one who could lose her if she was stopped! Although it was barely half past two, she hurried up the rue du Rocher, towards the rue Cardinet.

M. Camy-Lamotte, left alone, had stopped in front of his office. Familiar with the Tuileries, where his function as Secretary General of the Ministry of Justice had him summoned almost daily, just as powerful as the Minister, employed even in more intimate tasks, he knew how much this Grandmorin affair irritated and worried, in high places. The opposition newspapers continued to run a noisy campaign, with some accusing the police of being so busy with political surveillance that they no longer had time to stop the assassins, others searching the president's life. giving it to be understood that he was from the court, where the lowest debauchery reigned; and this campaign was getting really disastrous, as the elections were approaching. So we expressed to the Secretary General the formal desire to end it as quickly as possible, no matter how. The minister having unloaded on him this delicate affair, he found himself the sole master of the decision to be taken, under his responsibility, it is true: which deserved examination, because he had no doubts about paying for everything. world, if he was clumsy.

Still pensive, M. Camy-Lamotte went to open the door of the next room, where M. Denizet was waiting. And the latter, who had listened, exclaimed, on returning:

—I told you, it was wrong to suspect these people… This woman is obviously thinking only of saving her husband. a possible referral. She didn't have a suspicious word.

The secretary general did not respond immediately. Absorbed, his glances on the judge, whose heavy face, with thin lips, struck him, he now thought of this magistracy, which he had in his hand as the occult chief of

staff, and he was astonished that it was still so dignified in his poverty, so intelligent in his professional numbness. But this one, really, so shrewd as he thought he was, with his eyes veiled by thick lids, had a tenacious passion when he thought he had the truth.

“So,” resumed M. Camy-Lamotte, “you persist in seeing the culprit in this Cabuche?”

M. Denizet gave a start of astonishment.

—Oh! certainly! … Everything overwhelms him. I have listed the proofs for you, they are, I dare say, classic, because not one is missing… I looked for an accomplice, a woman in the coupe, as you did to me. hear. It seemed to agree with the testimony of a mechanic, a man who saw the scene of the murder; but, cleverly questioned by me, this man did not persist in his first statement, and he even recognized the travel blanket, as being the black mass he had spoken of… oh! Yes, of course, Cabuche is the culprit, especially since, if we don’t have it, we don’t have anyone.

Until then, the secretary general had waited to give him knowledge of the written proof he possessed; and now that his conviction was established, he hastened still less to establish the truth. What is the use of ruining the false trail of instruction if the true trail leads to greater embarrassment? All of this had to be examined first.

—My God! he continued with the smile of a tired man, I am willing to admit that you are right… I only invited you to come and study certain serious points with you. This affair is exceptional, and here it has become quite political: you can feel it, don’t you? Therefore we are going Perhaps we find ourselves forced to act as men of government… Let’s see, quite frankly, according to your interrogations, this girl, the mistress of this Cabuche, has been abused, eh?

The judge pouted like a shrewd man, while his eyes half disappeared behind his lids.

—Lady! I believe the president had put it in a bad state, and that will surely come out of the trial… Add that, if the defense is entrusted to an opposition lawyer, one can expect an unpacking of stories unfortunate, because there is no lack of these stories over there in our country.

This Denizet was not so stupid, when he no longer obeyed the routine of the profession, enthroned in the absolute of its perspicacity and its

omnipotence. He understood why he was being summoned, not to the Ministry of Justice, but to the private residence of the Secretary General.

“Finally,” he concluded, seeing that the latter was not flinching, “we will have a rather messy affair.”

M. Camy-Lamotte contented himself with nodding his head. He was calculating the results of the other trial, that of the Roubauds. Certainly, if the husband went to the assizes, he would say everything, his wife debauched too, when she was a young girl, and then adultery, and the jealous rage which must have driven him to murder; not to mention that it was no longer a a servant and a convict, whom this employee, married to this pretty woman, was going to implicate a whole corner of the bourgeoisie and the world of the railroads. Then, did you ever know what you were walking on, with a man like the president? Perhaps we would fall into unforeseen abominations. No, decidedly, the Roubaud affair, the real culprits, was even dirtier. It was resolved, he put it aside, absolutely. To retain one, he would have inclined to keep the case of the innocent Cabuche.

“I am going to your system,” he said at last to M. Denizet. There are, in fact, strong presumptions against the carrier, if he had to exercise legitimate vengeance… But how sad it is, my God! and how much mud we would have to stir! … I know very well that justice must remain indifferent to consequences, and that, hovering above interests…

He did not finish, ended with a gesture, while the judge, silent in turn, waited with a gloomy air for the orders he felt were coming. From the moment one accepted his own truth, this creation of his intelligence, he was ready to make the sacrifice of the idea of justice to governmental necessities. But the secretary, in spite of his habitual address in these kinds of transactions, hurried a little, spoke too quickly, as a master obeyed.

—Finally, we want a dismissal… Arrange things so that the case is closed.

“Pardon me, monsieur,” declared M. Denizet, “I am no longer the master of the affair, it depends on my conscience.”

Immediately M. Camy-Lamotte smiled, becoming correct again, with that disillusioned and polite air which seemed to mock the world.

—Without a doubt. It is therefore to your conscience that I am addressing myself.

I let you make the decision that it will dictate to you, certain that you will weigh the pros and cons fairly, with a view to the triumph of sound doctrines and public morals… You know, better than I, that it is sometimes heroic to accept an evil, if we do not want to fall into a worse… Finally, appeals to you only to the good citizen, to the honest man. No one thinks of interfering with your independence, and that is why I repeat that you are the absolute master of the affair, as the law wanted, moreover.

Jealous of this unlimited power, especially when he was about to use it badly, the judge greeted each of these sentences with a satisfied nod.

“Besides,” continued the other, with a redoubling of good grace the exaggeration of which became ironic, “we know to whom we are addressing. We have been following your efforts for a long time, and I can tell you that we would call you immediately in Paris, if there was a vacancy.”

M. Denizet made a movement. What? if he rendered the service requested, his great ambition, his dream of a seat in Paris, would not be fulfilled. But, already, M. Camy-Lamotte added, having understood:

—Your place is marked there, it is a question of time… Only, since I have started to be indiscreet, I am happy to inform you that you are carried for the cross on August 15th.

For a moment the judge consulted himself. He would have preferred advancement, for he calculated that there was at the end an increase of about one hundred and sixty-six francs a month; and, in the decent misery in which he lived, it was more well-being, his wardrobe renewed, his good Mélanie better fed, less cantankerous. But the cross, however, was good to take. Then he had a promise. And he who would not have sold himself, nurtured in the tradition of this honest and mediocre magistracy, he immediately gave in to a simple hope, to the vague commitment that the administration made to promote him. The judicial function was nothing more than a profession like any other, and it dragged the ball of advancement, like a hungry canvasser, always ready to bow under the orders of power.

“I am very touched,” he murmured, “please tell the minister.”

He had stood up, feeling that now all they could add one and the other would bother them.

“So,” he concluded, his eyes dull, his face dead, I will complete my investigation, taking your scruples into account. Naturally, if we do not have absolute facts proven against Cabuche, it would be better not to risk the unnecessary scandal of a trial… We will release him, we will continue to monitor him.

The secretary-general, on the threshold, finished showing himself to be quite pleasant.

“Monsieur Denizet, we are completely relying on your great tact and your high honesty.”

When he found himself alone, M. Camy-Lamotte had the curiosity, useless now moreover, to compare the page written by Séverine, with the unsigned note, which he had discovered in President Grandmorin’s papers. The resemblance was complete. He folded up the letter, squeezed it carefully, for, if he had not said a word to the examining magistrate, he considered that such a weapon was good to keep. And as the profile of this little woman, so frail and so strong in her nervous resistance, evoked before him, he shrugged the shoulders indulgent and mocking. Ah! these creatures, when they want! Severine, at twenty minutes to three, had been early in the Rue Cardinet, at the appointment she had given Jacques. He lived there, at the top of a big house, a narrow bedroom, where he hardly went up until the evening to go to bed; and again he slept twice a week, the two nights he spent in Le Havre, between the evening express and the morning express. That day, however, soaked in water, broken with fatigue, he came home to throw himself on his bed. So that Séverine would perhaps have waited in vain for him if the quarrel between a neighboring household, a husband who knocked out his screaming wife, had not woken him up. He had washed himself and dressed in a very bad temper, having recognized her downstairs on the sidewalk, looking out of his attic window.

—Finally, it’s you! she cried, when she saw him come out of the porte cochere. I was afraid I had misunderstood… You had told me at the corner of the rue Saussure…

And, without waiting for his answer, looking up at the house:

“So is that where you live?”

He had, without telling her, fixed the meeting in front of her door, because the depot, where they were to go together, was almost opposite. But her question bothered him, he imagined that she was going to push the good

fellowship up to ask him to see her room. It was so sparsely furnished and so messy that he was ashamed of it.

—Oh! I don’t stay, I perch, he replied. Hurry, I’m afraid the chef is already out.

In fact, when they presented themselves at the small house which the latter occupied, behind the depot, in the enclosure of the station, they did not find him; and, in vain, they went from hangar to hangar: everywhere they were told to come back around half-past four, if they wanted to be sure of meeting him at the repair shops.

—That’s good, we’ll come back, Séverine declared.

Then, when she was outside again, alone in the company of Jacques:-

If you are free, does it matter to you that I have to wait with you?

He could not refuse, and besides, despite the dull concern she caused him, she exerted a growing charm on him. and so strong, that the voluntary sullenness in which he had promised himself to shut himself up vanished from his gentle glances. This one, with her long, tender and timid face, must have loved like a faithful dog, whom one does not even have the courage to beat.

“No doubt I will not leave you,” he replied in a less abrupt tone. Only we have more than an hour to lose… Would you like to go into a cafe?

She was smiling at him, happy to finally feel him cordial. Briskly, she cried out.

—Oh! no, no, I don’t want to shut myself up… I prefer to walk on your arm, in the streets, wherever you like.

And she took him by the arm of herself, gently. Now that he was no longer dark from the trip, she found him distinguished, with his comfortable employee attire, his bourgeois air, which was revealed by a sort of free pride, the habit of the great outdoors and the danger faced every day. day. Never had she noticed so clearly that he was a handsome boy, with a round and regular face, very brown mustaches on the white skin; and only her shifty eyes, her eyes strewn with gold dots, which turned away from her, continued to distrust her. If he avoided looking her in the face, was it then that he did not want to engage, to remain in control of acting as he pleased, even against her? From that moment, in the uncertainty in which she was still, resumed shudder, every time she thought of that cabinet in the rue du Rocher where her life was decided, she had only one goal, to feel for

herself, everything for her, the man who gave her his arm, to obtain that when she lifted her head he would keep her eyes in hers, deeply. So it would belong to him. She didn't love him, she didn't even think of that. She was just trying to make him her thing, so that she no longer had to fear him.

A few minutes, they walked without speaking, in the continual stream of passers-by which encumber this populous district. Sometimes they were forced to get off the sidewalk; and they were crossing the pavement, in the middle of cars. Then they found themselves in front of the Square des Batignolles, almost deserted at this time of year. The sky, however, washed by the morning flood, was of a very soft blue; and, under the warm March sun, the lilacs were budding.

—Shall we go in? Severine asked. All these people make me dizzy.

On his own, Jacques was about to enter, oblivious to the need to have more of his own, far from the crowd.

"Here or elsewhere," he said. Come in.

Slowly, they continued to walk along the lawns, between the leafless trees. A few women were walking children in bathing suits, and there were passers-by crossing the garden to cut short, hastening the pace. They crossed the river, climbed among the rocks; then they returned, idle, when they passed among tufts of fir trees, the evergreen foliage of which shone in the sun, a dark green. And, a bench being there, in this solitary corner, hidden from view, they sat down, without even consulting each other this time, as if brought to this place by an agreement.

"It's nice all the same today," she said after a silence.

"Yes," he replied, "the sun has reappeared."

But their thought was not of that. He, who fled from women, had just thought of the events that had brought him closer of it. She was there, she touched him, she threatened to invade his existence, and he felt a continual surprise. Since the last interrogation in Rouen, he no longer doubted it, this woman was an accomplice in the murder of the Croix-de-Maufras. How? "Or" What? as a result of what circumstances? driven by what passion or what interest? he had asked himself these questions, without being able to clearly resolve them. However, he had ended up arranging a story: the husband interested, violent, eager to take possession of the legacy; perhaps the fear that the will would be changed to their disadvantage; perhaps the calculation of attaching his wife to him with a bloody tie. And he stuck to

this story, the dark corners of which attracted him, interested him, without his trying to clarify them. The idea that his duty would be to tell justice everything had haunted him too. Even it was this idea that preoccupied him, since he was sitting on that bench, near her, so close, that he felt the warmth of hers against his hip.

“In March,” he continued, “it’s astonishing to be able to stay outside like that in summer.”

—Oh! she said, as soon as the sun comes up, it feels good.

And, for her part, she reflected that this boy really would have had to be stupid, not to have guessed them. They had thrown themselves too much at her head, she was still hugging him too much right now. So, in the silence cut by empty words, she followed the reflections he made. Their eyes having met, she had just read that he came to wonder if it was not her he had seen, weighing with all her weight on the legs of the victim, as well as a black mass… What to do, what to say, to bind it with an indestructible bond ?

“This morning,” she added, “it was very cold in Le Havre.”

“Not to mention,” he said, “all the water we have received.”

And, at that moment, Séverine had a sudden inspiration. She did not reason, did not argue: it happened to her, instinctive impulse, from the dark depths of his intelligence and his heart; for, if she had discussed, she would not have said anything. But she felt that it was very good, and that by speaking, she conquered him.

Softly, she took his hand, she looked at him. The tufts of green trees hid them from passers-by in the neighboring streets; they heard only a distant rolling of cars, muffled in this sunny solitude of the square; while, alone, at the bend of the alley, a child was there, playing in silence filling a small bucket with sand with a shovel. And, without transition, with all his soul, in a low voice: “Do you believe me guilty?”

He shuddered slightly, he stopped his eyes in hers.

Yes, he replied, in the same low, emotional voice.

Then she squeezed his hand she had kept, in a closer embrace; and she did not continue immediately, she felt their fever merge.

—You are mistaken, I am not guilty.

And she said that, not to convince him, but only to warn him that she must be innocent in the eyes of others. It was the confession of the woman

who said no, in the desire that it be no, all the same and always.

—I am not guilty… You will no longer bother me to believe that I am guilty.

And she was very happy, seeing that he left his eyes in hers, deeply. Without doubt, what she had just done there was the gift of her person; for she gave herself up, and later, if he asked for her, she could not refuse. But the bond was tied between them, indissoluble: she dared him to speak now, he was hers as she was hers. The confession had united them.

“You won’t hurt me any more, do you believe me?”

“Yes, I believe you,” he replied, smiling.

Why would he force her to brutally talk about this awful thing? Later, she would tell him everything, if she felt the need to. This way of being calm, by confessing to him, without saying anything, touched him a lot, as well as a mark of infinite tenderness. She was so confident, so fragile, with her sweet periwinkle eyes! she appeared to him so woman, completely to man, always ready to endure it, to be happy! And, above all, what delighted him, while their hands remained joined and their eyes never left each other, was not to find in him his discomfort, that frightful shudder which agitated him, near a woman, to the idea of possession. The others, he had not been able to touch their flesh, without feeling the desire to bite into them, in an abominable hunger to cut their throats. Could he love her, that one,

“You know very well that I am your friend and that you have nothing to fear from me,” he whispered in her ear. I don’t want to know your stuff, it will be as you like… Can you hear me? fully dispose of my person.

He had come so close to her face that he could feel his hot breath in his mustache. Still in the morning, he would have trembled, under the savage fear of a crisis. What was happening, so that there was hardly a shudder left, with the happy weariness of convalescence? This idea that she had killed, become a certainty, showed her different, grown up, apart. Maybe she hadn’t only helped, but hit. He was convinced of it, without any proof. And, from then on, it seemed to be sacred to him, beyond all reasoning, in the unconsciousness of the frightened desire which she inspired in him.

The two were now chatting happily, as a dating couple, with whom love begins.

—You should give me your other hand, so that I warm it.

—Oh! no, not here. We would be seen.

—Who? since we are alone… And besides, there would be no great harm. Children are not made like that.

—I hope so.

She laughed frankly, in the joy of being saved. She didn’t like him, this boy; she thought she was sure of it; and if she had promised herself, she was already dreaming of a means of not paying. He looked nice, he wouldn’t torment her, everything was working out just fine.

—It is understood, we are comrades, without the others, nor even my husband, having anything to do with it… Now let go of my hand, and do not look at me like that anymore, because you will wear out the eyes.

But he kept his delicate fingers between hers. Very low, he stammered:-

You know that I love you.

Quickly, she had freed herself with a slight shake. And, standing in front of the bench, where he remained seated.

—That’s madness, for example! Be nice, we’re coming.

Indeed, a nurse was arriving, with her sleeping baby in her arms. Then a young girl passed, very busy. The sun was sinking, was drowning on the horizon, in purple vapors, and the rays went out from the lawns, dying in gold dust, at the green tips of the pines. There was something like a sudden stop in the continuous rolling of the cars. Five o’clock was heard striking at a nearby clock.

—Ah! my God! cried Séverine, five o’clock, and I have an appointment in the rue du Rocher!

Her joy fell, she rediscovered the anguish of the stranger who awaited her there, remembering that she was not yet saved. She turned quite pale, her lips trembling.

“But the head of the depot you had to see?” said Jacques, who had risen from the bench to take her in his arm.

—Never mind! I’ll see him another time… Listen, my friend, I don’t need you any more, let me run quickly. And thank you again, thank you with all my heart.

She squeezed his hands, she hurried.

—See you later, at the train.

—Yes See you soon.

Already she was walking away at a rapid pace, she was disappearing between the clumps of the square; while he slowly made his way towards

the rue Cardinet.

Mr. Camy-Lamotte had just had a long conference at home with the chief operating officer of the West Company. Mandé under the pretext of another affair, he had ended up confessing how much this Grandmorin trial bothered the Company. It was first complaints from newspapers about some security for travelers, in the first car class. Then, all the personnel were involved in the adventure, several employees were suspected, without counting this Roubaud, the most compromised, that one could stop at any moment. Finally, the rumors of nasty morals which ran about the president, member of the board of directors, seemed to reflect on this whole board. And so it was that the alleged crime of a little assistant station master, some story Dodgy, low and messy, climbed up through the complicated cogs, shook this enormous machine of a railway operation, wrecked it up to the upper administration. The shock went even higher, reached the ministry, threatened the State, in the political malaise of the moment: a critical hour, a great social body whose decomposition was hastened by the slightest fever. So, when M. Camy-Lamotte had learned from his interlocutor that the Company had resolved to dismiss Roubaud in the morning, he strongly protested against this measure. No! no! nothing would be more awkward, it would redouble the uproar in the press, if she took it into her head to put the deputy in political victim. Everything would crack even more, from bottom to top, and God knew what disagreeable discoveries one would arrive at for both sides! The scandal had lasted too long, it was necessary to be silent as soon as possible. And the head of operations, convinced, had undertaken to maintain Roubaud, not even to move him from Le Havre. We could see that there were no dishonest people in all of this. It was over, the case would be closed.

When Séverine, out of breath, her heart beating violently, found herself in the stern cabinet in the rue du Rocher, in front of M. Camy-Lamotte, he gazed at her for a moment in silence, interested in the extraordinary effort she made to appear calm. Decidedly, she was sympathetic to him, this delicate criminal with periwinkle eyes.

—Well! madame…

And he paused to enjoy his anxiety for a few more seconds. But she had such a deep gaze, he felt her thrust all towards him, in such a need to know, that he was pitiful.

—Well! madam, I saw the head of the exploitation, I obtained that your husband was not dismissed… The matter is settled.

Then she fainted, under the flood of too lively joy that flooded her. Her eyes had filled with tears, and she said nothing, she was smiling.

He repeated, insisting on the sentence, to give it all its meaning: “The affair is settled… You can go back to Le Havre in peace.”

She understood well: he meant that they would not be arrested, that they were being pardoned. It was not only the job maintained, it was the dreadful forgotten, buried drama. With a movement of instinctive caress, like a pretty domestic animal which thanks and flatters, she leaned over her hands, kissed them, kept them pressed against her cheeks. And this time he had not withdrawn them, himself very moved by the tender charm of this gratitude.

“Only,” he continued, trying to become severe again, remember and behave well.

—Oh! sir!

But he wanted to keep them at his mercy, woman and man. He alluded to the letter.

—Remember that the file remains there, and that at the slightest mistake, everything can be resumed… Above all, recommend that your husband no longer be involved in politics. On this chapter, we would be ruthless. I know he has already compromised himself, I have been told of an unfortunate quarrel with the sub-prefect; well, he passes for a republican, it’s detestable… isn’t it? let it be wise, or we will simply delete it.

She was up, now anxious to be outside, to give

—Sir, we will obey you, we will be what you want… Anytime, anywhere, you will only have to order: I belong to you.

He had smiled again, his weary air, with the hint of disdain of a man who had drunk for a long time from the nothingness of all things.

—Oh! I will not abuse, madame, I will no longer abuse.

And he himself opened the cabinet door. On the landing, she turned twice, her face beaming, thanking him again.

In the rue du Rocher, Séverine walked madly. She noticed that she was walking up the street for no reason; and she went back down the slope, crossing the road for nothing, at the risk of to crush. It was a need for movement, gestures, cries. Already, she understood why they were being pardoned, and she found herself saying: “Of course!” they are afraid, there

is no danger of them disturbing these things, I was very stupid to torture myself. It’s obvious… Ah! what luck! saved, saved for good, this time! … And no matter what, I am going to frighten my husband, so that he can keep quiet… Saved, saved, what luck!

As she emerged into the Rue Saint-Lazare, she saw, by a jeweler’s clock, that it was twenty to six.

—Here! I’m going to buy myself a good dinner, I have time.

In front of the train station, and, seated alone at a little white table, against the one-way mirror of the storefront, very amused by the movement of the street, she ordered a fine dinner, oysters, fillets of sole, a roast chicken wing. It was the least that she made up for her bad lunch. She devoured, found the oatmeal bread delicious, had another treat made for herself, some puffed donuts. Then, her coffee drunk, she hurried, because she only had a few minutes to take the express.

Jacques, on leaving her, after going home to put on his work clothes, immediately went to the depot, where he usually did not arrive until half an hour before the departure of his work. machine. He had ended up relying on Pecqueux for visiting care, although the driver was drunk two out of three times. But that day, in the tender emotion in which he was, an unconscious scruple had invaded him, he wanted to ensure himself that all the parts were working properly; all the more so since, in the morning, coming from Le Havre, he thought he had noticed a greater expenditure of force for less work.

In the vast closed hangar, black with coal, and lit by tall dusty windows, among the other machines at rest, Jacques’s was already at the head of a track, destined to start first. A depot driver came from load the hearth, red cinders fell below, in the pit to prick the fire. It was one of those express machines, with two coupled axles, of a fine and giant elegance, with its large light wheels united by steel arms, its wide chest, its elongated and powerful loins, all this logic. and all this certainty which makes the sovereign beauty of beings of metal, precision in force. Like the other machines of the Compagnie de l’Ouest, apart from the number which designated it, it bore the name of a station, that of Lison, a station in Cotentin. But Jacques, out of tenderness, had made it into a woman’s name, Lison, as he said, with caressing gentleness.

And, it was true, he had loved her with love, his machine, for the four years he had driven her. He had led others, the docile and the restive, the courageous and the lazy; he was not unaware that each had its own character, that many were not worth much, as they say of women of flesh and blood; to ensure that, if he liked that one, it was in truth she had rare qualities of good woman. She was gentle, obedient, easy to start, a regular and continuous walk, thanks to her good vaporization. It was said that, if she was starting with such ease, it was from the drawers; just as if it vaporized a lot with little fuel, this was due to the quality of the copper in the tubes and the happy arrangement of the boiler. But he knew there was something else, because other machines, identically constructed, assembled with the same care, showed none of his qualities. There was the soul, the mystery of manufacturing, that something that the chance of hammering adds to the metal, that the skill of the assembly worker gives to the parts: the personality of the machine, life.

He therefore loved her as a grateful male, the Lison, who left and stopped quickly, like a vigorous and docile run; he loved her because, apart from the fixed salary, she earned him money, thanks to the heating bonuses. It vaporized so well that it actually saved a lot of coal. And he had only one reproach to address to him, a too great need for lubrication: the cylinders especially devoured unreasonable quantities of grease, a continuous hunger, a real debauchery. In vain, he had tried to moderate it. But she immediately ran out of steam, it had to be her temperament. He had resigned himself to tolerating this gluttonous passion for her, just as one turns a blind eye to a vice in people who are, on the other hand, steeped in qualities; and he just said, with her driver, as a joke, that she had, like beautiful women, the need to be greased too often.

While the hearth was roaring and the Lison gradually came under pressure, Jacques turned around her, inspecting her in each of her rooms, trying to discover why, in the morning, she had eaten more fat than usual… And he could find nothing, it was shiny and clean, with one of those cheerful neatnesses which announce the loving care of a mechanic. He was constantly seen wiping it, polishing it; especially at the finish, just as one stops the smoking animals of a long race, he rubbed it vigorously, that it was hot to better clean it from stains and smudges. He never jostled her either, kept her walking smoothly, avoiding being late, which then

necessitated unfortunate jumps of speed. So the two had always got along so well that not once in four years had he complained about her in the depot register, where the mechanics entered their requests for repairs, the bad mechanics, lazy or drunk, constantly quarreling with their machines. But, really, that day he had his debauchery of fat on his heart; and it was something else too, something vague and deep, that he had not yet felt a concern, a distrust of her, as if he doubted her and wanted to make sure that she was not going to behave badly on the way.

However, Pecqueux was not there, and Jacques lost his temper, when he finally appeared, his tongue sticky, after a lunch made with a friend. Usually, the two men got along very well, in this long companionship which took them from one end of the line to the other, shaken side by side, silent, united by the same task and the same dangers. Although he was more than ten years younger, the mechanic was paternal towards his driver, covered his vices, let him sleep for an hour, when he was too drunk; and the latter gave him back this complacency in the devotion of a good dog, an excellent worker besides, experienced in the trade, apart from his drunkenness. It must be said that he also loved the Lison, which was enough for a good understanding. The two of them and the machine, they made a real household three, without ever having an argument. Also Pecqueux, taken aback at being so badly received, he looked at Jacques with redoubled surprise, when he heard him growl his doubts against her.

—What? but she fits like a fairy!

—No, no, I’m not at ease.

And, despite the good condition of each piece, he continued to nod head. He moved the levers, made sure the valve was working. He climbed onto the apron, went himself to fill the lubricating cups of the cylinders; while the driver wiped down the dome, where slight traces of rust remained. The sandpit rod was working well, everything should have reassured him. It was that, in her heart, the Lison was no longer alone. Another tenderness grew there, this slender creature, so fragile, that he always saw near him, on the bench in the square, with his cuddly weakness, which needed to be loved and protected. Never, when an involuntary cause had made him late, did he launch his machine at a speed of eighty kilometers, he had never thought of the dangers that travelers could run. And now the very idea of driving this almost hated woman back to Havre in the morning, brought in with

boredom, worked him with anxiety, the fear of an accident, in which he imagined himself injured by his fault, dying between his steps. arms. From now on, he was in charge of love. The suspected Lison would do well to behave properly if she wanted to keep her reputation as a good walker.

Six o'clock struck, Jacques and Pecqueux climbed onto the small tin bridge which connected the tender to the machine; and, the last having opened the trap on a sign from his boss, a vortex white vapor filled the black shed. Then, obeying the throttle lever, slowly turned by the mechanic, the Lison started, left the depot, whistled to be cleared the way. Almost immediately, she was able to enter the Batignolles tunnel. But, at the Pont de l'Europe, he had to wait; and it was only the regulation time when the switchman sent him on the six-thirty express, to which two crewmen harnessed him firmly.

We were about to leave, there were only five minutes left, and Jacques leaned forward, surprised not to see Séverine in the midst of the crowd of travelers. It was quite certain that she did would not go up without having first come to him. Finally, she appeared, late, almost running. And, in fact, she walked along the whole train, stopped only at the machine, her complexion lively, exulting with joy.

Her little feet lifted, her face lifted, laughing.

—Don't worry, here I am.

He, too, laughed, happy that she was there.

—Candy! things are going well.

But she raised herself again, continued in a lower voice:

"My friend, I am happy, very happy… A great chance that happens to me… Everything I wanted."

And he understood perfectly, he felt great pleasure. Then, as she was running away, she turned to add, jokingly:-

Say, now, don't go and break my bones.

He exclaimed in a cheerful voice:

—Oh! for example! do not be afraid!

But the doors banged, Séverine only had time to get in; and Jacques, at the signal of the chief conductor, whistled, then opened the regulator. We left. It was the same departure as that of the tragic train in February, at the same time, in the middle of the same activities at the station, in the same

noises, the same smoke. Only, it was still daylight, a clear twilight, of infinite sweetness. Head to the door, Séverine looked.

And, on the Lison, Jacques, mounted on the right, warmly dressed in a trousers and a woolen blouse, wearing glasses with cloth blinds, fastened behind his head, under his cap, never left the way of his eyes, leaned at any second, outside the window of the shelter, To see better. Roughly shaken by the trepidation, not even conscious of it, he had his right hand on the shifting wheel, like a pilot on the rudder wheel; he maneuvered it with an insensible and continuous movement, moderating, increasing speed; and, with his left hand, he kept pulling the whistle rod, for leaving Paris is difficult and full of pitfalls. He whistled at level crossings, stations, tunnels, large curves. A red signal having shown itself in the distance, in the falling day, he asked for the way for a long time, passed like thunder. Barely, from time to time, he glanced at the manometer, turning the small handwheel of the injector, as soon as the pressure reached ten kilograms. And it was on the track always, ahead, that his gaze returned, all watching the smallest peculiarities, with such attention that he saw nothing else, that he did not even feel the wind blowing in a storm… The manometer lowered, he opened the door of the hearth, raising the rack; and Pecqueux, accustomed to the gesture, understood, smashed charcoal with hammers, which he spread it with the shovel, in an even layer, over the entire width of the grate. A fiery heat burned the legs of both of them; then, with the door closed, the current of icy air blew again.

Night was falling, Jacques redoubled his caution. He had rarely felt the Lison so obedient; he possessed it, rode it as he pleased, with the absolute will of the master; and yet he did not relax his severity, treated her like a tamed beast, of which we must always be wary. There, behind his back, in the high-speed train, he saw a thin figure, surrendering to him, confident, smiling. He had one A slight shiver, he squeezed the shift wheel with a harder grip, he pierced the growing darkness with a fixed gaze, in search of red lights. After the branches of Asnières and Colombes, he had breathed a little. Until Mantes, all was well, the track was a real landing, where the train rolled at ease. After Mantes, he had to push the Lison up, so that she climbed a fairly steep ramp, almost half a league. Then, without slowing it down, he launched it on the gentle slope of the Rolleboise tunnel, two and a half kilometers of tunnel, which it passed in barely three minutes. There

was only one more tunnel, that of Roule, near Gaillon, before the Sotteville station, a dreaded station, which the complication of the tracks, the continual maneuvers, the constant congestion, make very perilous. All the strength of his being was in his watchful eyes, in his leading hand; and the Lison, whistling and smoking, crossed Sotteville at full steam, stopped only at Rouen, from where she set off again, calmed down a little, climbing more slowly the ramp which goes to Malaunay.

The moon had risen, very clear, with a white light, which enabled Jacques to distinguish the smallest bushes, and even the stones of the roads, in their rapid flight. As, at the exit of the Malaunay tunnel, he threw a blow to the right With an eye, worried by the shadow cast by a large tree, blocking the way, he recognized the remote corner, the brush field, from which he had seen the murder. The country, deserted and fierce, marched past with its continual hills, its black hollows of small woods, its ravaged desolation. Then, at Croix-de-Maufras, under the motionless moon, the abrupt appearance of the house planted at an angle, in its abandonment and its distress, the shutters eternally closed, of a frightful melancholy. And, without knowing why, this time again, more than the previous ones, Jacques had a heavy heart, as if passing before his misfortune.

But, immediately, his eyes caught another image. Near from the Misard house, against the level crossing barrier, Flore was there, standing. Now, on every trip, he saw her there, waiting for him, watching him. She didn’t stir, she just turned her head, to follow him longer, in the lightning that carried her away. Her tall silhouette stood out in black against the white light, her golden hair lit up alone, in the pale gold of the star.

And Jacques, having pushed the Lison to make it cross the Motteville ramp, let it breathe a little along the Bolbec plateau, then finally launched it, from Saint-Romain to Harfleur, on the steepest slope of the line, three leagues than machines devour mad beasts at a gallop, smelling of the stable. And he was worn out with fatigue, in Le Havre, when, under the marquise, full of the din and smoke of the arrival, Séverine, before going back to her house, ran to say to him, in her cheerful and tender air:

—Thank you., See you tomorrow.

VI

A month passed, and a great calm had once again been established in the accommodation which the Roubauds occupied on the first floor of the station, above the waiting rooms. At home, with their neighbors in the corridor, among this small world of employees, subjected to a clock existence by the uniform return of the regular hours, life had started flowing again, monotonously. And he seemed like nothing had happened that was violent or abnormal.

The noisy and scandalous Grandmorin affair, slowly, was forgotten, was going to be closed, by the impotence in which justice seemed to be to discover the culprit. After a prevention of a fortnight still, the examining magistrate Denizet had issued an order of dismissal, with regard to Cabuche, motivated on what there did not exist against him sufficient charges; and a police legend was forming, romantic: that of an unknown, elusive assassin, an adventurer of crime, present everywhere at once, who was charged with all the murders and who dissipated in smoke, to the only appearance of agents. Scarcely a few jokes reappeared from time to time about this legendary assassin, in the opposition press, fevered by the approach of the general elections. The pressure of power, the violence of the prefects daily provided him with other subjects of indignant articles; so that, the newspapers no longer dealing with the matter, she had emerged from the passionate curiosity of the crowd. We didn’t even talk about it anymore.

What had completed to restore calm among the Roubauds was the happy way in which the other difficulty had just been ironed out, the one that threatened to raise the will of the president. Grandmorin. On the advice of Madame Bonnehon, the Lachesnaye had finally agreed not to attack this will, for fear of arousing the scandal, also very uncertain of the outcome of a trial. And, put in possession of their legacy, the Roubauds had been, for a week, owners of the Croix-de-Maufras, the house and the garden, valued at around forty thousand francs. Immediately, they had decided to sell it, this

house of debauchery and blood, which haunted them like a nightmare, where they would not have dared to sleep, in the terror of the specters of the past; and sell it as a whole, with the furniture, as it was, without repairing it or even remove dust. But, as, at a public auction, she would have lost too much, the buyers being rare who would consent to retire in this solitude, they had resolved to wait for an amateur, they had contented themselves with hanging an immense sign on the facade., easily readable from the continual passing trains. This appeal in large letters, this desolation for sale, added to the sadness of the closed shutters and the garden invaded by brambles. Roubaud having absolutely refused to go, even in passing, to make certain necessary arrangements, Séverine had gone there one afternoon; and she had left the keys to the Misards, instructing them to show the property, if buyers presented themselves. We could have settled in in two hours, because there were even laundry in the cupboards.

And, from then on, nothing worried the Roubauds any longer, so they let each day flow in the sleepy expectation of the next day. The house would eventually sell, they would invest the money, everything would work out fine. They forgot it, moreover, they lived as if they should never leave the three rooms they occupied: the dining room, the door of which opened directly onto the corridor; the bedroom, quite large, to the right; the kitchen, very small and without air, to the left. Same, in front of their windows, the Marquise de la Gare, this zinc slope which blocked their view, as well as a prison wall, instead of exasperating them as in the past, seemed to calm them, increased the feeling of infinite rest, of peace. comforting where they fell asleep. At least, you weren’t seen by neighbors, you didn’t always have spies’ eyes in front of you to search your house; and they no longer complained, spring having come, except of the stifling heat, of the blinding reflections of the zinc, heated by the first suns. After the frightful shock, which for nearly two months had given them a continual shiver, they blissfully enjoyed this overwhelming torpor reaction. They asked not to move, happy to be, simply, without trembling or suffering. Never had Roubaud shown himself to be such a precise, so conscientious employee: during the daytime, he went down to the quay at five in the morning, he did not come up for lunch until ten, came down again at eleven, went until five in the morning. evening, eleven hours full of service; at night, taken from five in the evening to five in the morning, he did not even have a short rest

from a meal made at home, for he was supping in his office; and he carried this harsh servitude with a sort of satisfaction, he seemed to take pleasure in it, going down to details, wanting everything to see, to do everything, as if he had found an oblivion in this fatigue, a new beginning of a balanced, normal life. For her part, Séverine, almost always alone, who was a widow every other week, who the other week only saw him at lunch and dinner, seemed to be seized with the fever of a good housewife. Usually she would sit, embroider, loath to touch the household, which an old woman, Mother Simon, came to do from nine o'clock until noon. But, since she found herself quiet at home, certain to stay there, ideas of cleaning, arrangement, occupied her. She only resumed her chair after having searched everywhere. Besides, both slept well. In their rare tete-a-tete, at meals, as well as on the nights when they slept together, they never spoke of the affair again; and they had to believe it was over, buried.

For Séverine, especially, life became very sweet again. Her laziness took hold of her, she again left the household to Mother Simon, like a young lady made only for fine needlework. She had started an interminable work, a whole embroidered coverlet, which threatened to occupy her whole life. She got up quite late, happy to be alone in bed, rocked by the departures and arrivals of trains, which marked for her the march of the hours, exactly, like a clock. In the early days of her marriage, those violent noises from the station, whistles, shocks from turntables, rolls of lightning, those sudden tremors, like earthquakes, which shook her with the furniture, had terrified her… Then, little by little, the habit had come, the sonorous and shivering station entered his life; and now she liked it, her calm was made up of this commotion and noise. Until lunch, she traveled from room to room, chatting with the cleaning lady, her hands still. Then she would spend the long afternoons, sitting in front of the dining room window, her work most often fallen on her knees, happy to do nothing. During the weeks when her husband went back to bed at dawn, she heard him snoring until evening; and, moreover, it had become for her the good weeks, those which she lived as formerly, before being married, taking up all the width of the bed, then recreating herself at will, free of her whole day. She hardly ever went out, she could only see the smoke of the neighboring factories of Le Havre, whose large black eddies stained the sky, above the zinc ridge, which cut off the horizon, a few meters from her eyes. The city was there behind this

eternal wall; she still felt she was present, her annoyance at not seeing her had taken on a softness in the long run; five or six pots of wallflowers and verbena, which she cultivated in the marquise's gutter, gave her a little garden, blooming her solitude. Sometimes she spoke of herself as of a recluse at the bottom of a wood. Alone, in his moments of loitering, Roubaud stepped over the window; then, spinning along the gutter, he went to the end, climbed the zinc slope, sat down at the top of the gable, above the Cours Napoleon; and there, at last, he was smoking his pipe, in the sky, overlooking the city spread out at his feet, the basins planted with the tall trees of the masts, the sea immense, of a pale green, to infinity.

It seemed that the same somnolence had won over the other households of employees, neighbors of the Roubauds. This corridor, where usually such a terrible wind of gossip blew, was also falling asleep. When Philomène visited Madame Lebleu, you could hardly hear the faint murmur of their voices. Surprised both to see how things turned out, they no longer spoke of the sous-chef except with disdainful commiseration : of course, to keep his place for him, his wife had gone to Paris to make some beautiful ones; well, a man crazy now, who would not wash away certain suspicions. And, as the cashier's wife was convinced that henceforth her neighbors were not strong enough to take over the accommodation from her, she simply showed them a great deal of contempt, passing very stiffly, not bowing; so much so that she even upset Philomène, who came less and less: she found her too proud and was no longer having fun. However, Madame Lebleu, to keep busy, continued to watch for the intrigue of Mademoiselle Guichon with the station master, M. Dabadie, without ever surprising them, moreover. In the hall, there was only the imperceptible rustle of his felt slippers. Everything having thus fallen asleep gradually, a month passed, of sovereign peace, like these great sleep that follows great catastrophes.

But, among the Roubauds, a point remained, painful, disturbing, a point on the floor of the dining room, where their eyes could not go by chance, without a discomfort, again, troubling them. It was, to the left of the window, the oak frieze that they had moved, then put back, to hide under the watch and the ten thousand francs, taken from the body of Grandmorin, without counting about three hundred francs in gold, in a wallet. Roubaud had only taken this watch and this money out of his pockets to make it seem like theft. He was not a thief, he would have starved to death next door, as

he said, rather than taking a penny or selling the watch. The old man's money, who had soiled his wife, which he had done justice to, this money stained with mud and blood, no! no! it was not money clean enough for an honest man to touch it. And he did not even think of the Maison de la Croix-de-Maufras, of which he accepted the gift: only the fact of the victim searched, of these tickets carried away in the abomination of the murder, revolted him, raised his conscience, a movement of decline and fear. However, the will had not come to him to burn them, then to go one evening to throw the watch and the purse into the sea. If simple prudence advised, a dull instinct protested in him against this destruction. He had unconscious respect, he would never have resigned himself to wiping out such a sum. First, the first night, he had buried it under his pillow, not deeming any corner safe enough. The following days, he had contrived to discover hiding places, he changed them every morning, agitated at the slightest noise, for fear of a judicial search. He had never made such an expenditure of imagination. Then, at the end of his tricks, weary of trembling, he had one day had the laziness to take back the money and the watch, hidden the day before under the frieze; and now, for nothing in the world, he wouldn't have searched there: it was like a mass grave, a hole of terror and death, where specters awaited him. He even avoided putting his feet on this sheet of the floor when walking; for the sensation was disagreeable to him, he imagined receiving a slight shock in his legs. Séverine, in the afternoon, when she sat down in front of the window, moved back her chair, so as not to be right above the corpse, which they kept in their floor. They did not talk about it among themselves, tried to believe that they would get used to it, ended up being irritated to find it again, to feel it every hour, more and more intrusive, under their soles. And this discomfort was from suffered in no way from the knife, the beautiful new knife bought by the wife, and which the husband had stuck in the lover's throat. Simply washed, it lay at the bottom of a drawer, it was sometimes used by Mother Simon, to cut bread.

Moreover, in this peace in which he lived, Roubaud had just introduced another cause of trouble, gradually growing, by forcing Jacques to frequent them. The shift in duty brought the mechanic back to Le Havre three times a week: Monday, from ten thirty-five in the morning to six twenty at night; The Thursday and Saturday evening from eleven hours to six hours five

forties of the morning. And, the first Monday, after the trip from Séverine, the sous-chef had been relentless.

—Come on, comrade, you cannot refuse to have a bite to eat with us… What the devil! you were very kind to my wife, I really owe you a thank you.

Twice in a month, Jacques had thus accepted to lunch. It seemed that Roubaud, embarrassed by the great silences which now took place when he ate with his wife, felt a relief as soon as he could place a guest between them. Immediately, he found stories, he chatted and joked.

—Come back as often as possible! You can see that you don't bother us.

One evening, a Thursday, like Jacques, cleansed, was going to wear in bed he had met the sous chef strolling around the depot; and, in spite of the late hour, the latter, bored of going home alone, had been accompanied to the station, then led the young man home. Séverine, still up, was reading. We had a little drink, we even played cards until after midnight.

And, henceforth, the lunches on Monday, the small evenings on Thursday and Saturday were turning to the habit. It was Roubaud himself, when his comrade was missing one day, who watched him to bring him back, reproaching him for his negligence. He grew darker and darker, he was only really gay with his new friend. This boy who first, who should now have been in execration to him, like the witness, the living evocation of the dreadful things that he wanted to forget, had on the contrary become necessary to him, perhaps precisely because he knew and he had not spoken. It remained between them, as well as a very strong bond, a complicity. Often the sous-chef looked at the other with an air of intelligence, squeezed his hand with sudden anger, the violence of which went beyond the simple expression of their comradeship.

But above all Jacques, in the household, remained a distraction. Severine, too, greeted him cheerfully, uttered a slight cry, upon entering, like a woman awakened by pleasure. She let go of everything, her embroidery, her book, escaped, in words and in laughter, the gray drowsiness in which she spent the days.

—Ah! how nice to have come! I heard the express, I thought of you.

When he had lunch, it was a party. She already knew his tastes, went out herself to get him fresh eggs: all this very nicely, like a good housewife who

receives the friend of the house, without his being able to see in it anything more than the desire of being kind and needing to be entertained.

—You know, Monday, come back! there will be cream.

Only when, at the end of a month, he was there, installed, the separation worsened between the Roubauds. Wife, more, liked in bed all alone, managed to meet there as little as possible with her husband; and the latter, so ardent, so brutal in the early days of marriage, did nothing to keep him there. He had loved her without delicacy, she had resigned herself to it with the submission of a complacent woman, thinking that things should be so, tasting no pleasure in it. But since the crime, this, without her knowing why, had been very repugnant to her. She was angry, scared. One evening, as the candle was not extinguished, she cried: on her, in that red face, convulsed, she thought she saw the face of the murderer again; and, from then on, she trembled each time, she had the horrible sensation of the murder, as if he had knocked it over with a knife in his hand. It was crazy, but his heart was pounding with fear. Less and less, moreover, he abused her, feeling her too reluctant to like it. Fatigue, indifference, whatever age brings, it seemed that the terrible crisis, the spilled blood, had produced between them. On nights when they couldn’t avoid the shared bed, they stood at both sides. And Jacques, certainly, helped to consummate this divorce, by drawing them by his presence of the obsession in which they were with themselves. He delivered them one from the other.

Roubaud, however, lived without remorse. He had only had fear of the consequences, before the case was closed; and his great anxiety was above all to lose his place. At this hour, he did not regret anything. Perhaps, however, if he had had to recommence the affair, he would not have involved his wife in it; for women are immediately frightened, hers escaped her, because he had put too heavy a weight on her shoulders. He would have remained the master, not descending with her to the terrified and quarrelsome comradeship of crime. But things were like that, we had to get used to it; all the more so since he had to make a real effort to put himself back into the state of mind he was in when, after the confession, he had judged the murder necessary for his life. If he had not killed the man, then it seemed to him that he could not have lived. Today that his jealous flame was dead, that he did not find the intolerable burn, invaded by numbness, as if the blood of his heart had thickened with all the blood shed, this necessity

of murder does not was no longer so obvious to him. He wondered if it was really worth killing. It was, moreover, not even repentance, a disillusion at most, the idea that one often does shameful things in order to be happy, without becoming more so. He, so talkative, fell into long silences, confused reflections, dark. Every day now, in order to avoid remaining face to face with his wife after meals, he climbed up on the marquise and sat down at the top of the gable; and, in the sea breezes, lulled with vague reveries, he smoked pipes, watching, over the city, the liners losing themselves on the horizon, towards distant seas.

One evening, Roubaud woke up from his former fierce jealousy. As he had gone to fetch Jacques from the depot, and was bringing him home for a little drink, he met Henri Dauvergne, the chief conductor, coming down the stairs. The latter seemed confused, explained that he had just seen Madame Roubaud, for a commission with which his sisters had charged him. The truth was that, for some time, he had been pursuing Séverine, in the hope of defeating her.

From the door, the sous-chef violently apostrophized his wife.

—What did he go up to do again? You know he bothers me!

—But, my friend, it is for an embroidery design…

—Embroidery, we won’t give it to him! Do you think I’m stupid enough not to understand what he’s looking for here? … And you, beware!

He walked over her, his fists clenched, and she recoiled, all white, astonished at the glare of this outburst, in the calm indifference in which they both lived. But they’ he was already addressing his companion.

—That’s true, fellows who fall into a household, with the air of believing that the wife will immediately throw herself at their head, and that the husband, very honored, will close his eyes! Me, it makes my blood boil… You see, in a case like this, I would strangle my wife, oh! therefore! And let this little gentleman not come back to it, or I will settle his case for him… Isn’t it? it’s disgusting.

Jacques, very embarrassed by the scene, did not know what to hold. Was it for him, this exaggeration of anger? did the husband want to give her a warning? He reassured himself when the latter continued in a cheerful voice:

“Great beast, I know very well that you would kick him out the door yourself… Go, give us some glasses, toast with us.”

He tapped Jacques on the shoulder, and Séverine, also recovered, smiled at the two men. Then, they drank together, they spent a very sweet hour.

It was thus that Roubaud drew his wife and his comrade together, with an air of good friendship, without appearing to think of the possible consequences. This question of jealousy precisely became the cause of a closer intimacy, of a whole secret tenderness, tightened by confidences, between Jacques and Séverine; because the latter, having seen her again two days later, pained her for having been so brutally treated, while she, her eyes flooded, confessed, by the involuntary overflow of her complaints, how little happiness she had found in her household. From that moment, they had a subject of conversation on their own, a complicity of friendship, where they ended up agreeing on a sign. At each visit, he questioned her with a glance, to find out if she had had any new cause for sadness. She replied in the same way, with a simple movement of her eyelids. Then their hands looked for each other behind the husband's back, they grew bolder, they corresponded by long pressures, saying to each other, with the tips of their warm fingers, the growing interest that facts of their existence. They rarely had the good fortune to meet for a minute, without Roubaud's presence. They always found him there, between them, in that melancholy dining room; and they did nothing to escape him, not even having the thought of arranging a meeting, at the end of some remote corner of the station. Until then, it had been a real affection, a drive of lively sympathy, which he hardly hampered, since a look, a shake of the hand, was still enough for them to understand each other.

The first time Jacques whispered in Séverine's ear that he would be waiting for her the following Thursday, at midnight, behind the depot, she rebelled, she withdrew her hand violently. It was his week of freedom, that of the night shift. But a great confusion had seized her, at the thought of leaving her house, of going to find this boy so far away, through the darkness of the station. She experienced a confusion she had never had, the fear of ignorant virgins whose hearts beat; and she did not give in immediately, he had to pray to her for nearly a fortnight, before she consented, despite the ardent desire she herself was for this nocturnal walk. June was beginning, the evenings were getting scorching, barely cooled by the sea breeze. Three times already, he had waited for her, hoping she would always join him, despite his refusal. That evening she had said no again; but

the night was moonless, a night of an overcast sky, where not a star shone, under the fiery mist which weighed down the sky. And, as he was standing in the shadows, he saw her at last come, dressed in black, with a silent step. It was so dark that she would have brushed past him without recognizing him, if he hadn’t stopped her in his arms, giving him a kiss. She gave a slight cry, shuddering. Then, laughing, she left her lips on his. Only, that was all, she never agreed to sit down in one of the sheds which surrounded them. They walked, they talked very loudly low, tight against each other. There was a large space there occupied by the depot and its outbuildings, all the land between rue Verte and rue François-Mazeline, each of which intersects the line of a level crossing: a sort of immense vacant lot, congested sidings, reservoirs, water intakes, constructions of all kinds, the two large sheds for machines, the small Sauvagnat house surrounded by a vegetable garden as large as the hand, the hovels where the workshops were installed repair, the guardhouse where the mechanics and drivers slept; and nothing was easier than to hide, to get lost like in the depths of a woods, among these deserted alleys, with inextricable detours. For an hour they tasted a delicious solitude there, to relieve their hearts from the friendly words they had collected for so long; because she only wanted to hear about affection, she had immediately told him that she would never be his, that it would be too bad to soil this pure friendship of which she was so proud, having the need to esteem herself. Then he accompanied her to the rue Verte, their mouths met, in a deep kiss. And she came home.

At this same hour, in the office of the sous-chefs, Roubaud began to doze, at the back of the old leather armchair, where he got up twenty times a night, his limbs broken. Until nine o’clock he had to receive and dispatch the evening trains. The tidal train occupied him particularly: it was the maneuvers, the teams, the expedition sheets to watch closely. Then, when the express from Paris had arrived and unplugged, he was supping alone in the office, on a corner of the table, with a piece of cold meat, taken down from his house, between two slices of bread. The last train, an omnibus from Rouen, entered the station at half past midnight. And the deserted platforms fell into a great silence, only rare gas lamps were left on, the entire station fell asleep, in this shivering half-darkness. Of all the staff, there were only two supervisors and four or five crew members, under the orders of the deputy chief. They were still snoring with closed fists on the

boards of the guardhouse; while Roubaud, forced to wake them up at the slightest alarm, only slumbered with his ears on the alert. Lest fatigue knock him out, towards daylight he set his alarm clock for five o'clock, when he had to be up, to receive the first train from Paris. But sometimes, especially for some time now, he couldn't sleep, seized with insomnia, turning over in his chair. So he went out, made a round, pushed to the the switchman, where he chatted for a moment. The vast black sky, the sovereign peace of the night ended by calming his fever. A following a battle with marauders, he had been armed with a revolver, which he wore all loaded in his pocket. And, often until dawn, he would walk like this, stopping as soon as he thought he saw the night moving, resuming his walk with the vague regret at not having to make the shot, relieved when the the sky whitened and drew from the shadows the great pale phantom of the station. Now that the day was breaking at three o'clock, he returned to his chair, where he slept a leaden sleep, until

Every fortnight, Thursday and Saturday, Séverine joined Jacques; and, one night, as she was talking to him about the revolver with which her husband was armed, they worried about it. In truth, Roubaud never went as far as the depot. This nevertheless gave their walks an appearance of danger, which doubled their charm. Above all, they had found an adorable corner: behind the Sauvagnats' house, it was a sort of alley, between enormous piles of charcoal, which made it the lonely street of a strange town, with large square palaces of black marble. We were absolutely hidden there and there was, at the end, a small tool shed, in which a stack of bags voids would have made a very soft layer. But, one Saturday when a sudden downpour forced them to take refuge there, she had persisted in remaining standing, always abandoning only her lips, in endless kisses. She did not put her modesty there, she gave her breath to drink, greedily, as if out of friendship. And when, burning with that flame, he tried to take her, she defended herself, she cried, repeating the same reasons each time. Why did he want to hurt her so much? It seemed so tender to him, to love each other, without all this filth of sex! Soiled at sixteen by the debauchery of this old man whose bloody specter haunted her, later abused by brutal appetites of her husband, she had retained a childish candor, a virginity, all the charming shame of passion which is ignored. What delighted her in Jacques was his gentleness, his obedience in not losing his hands on her, as soon as she

simply took them between hers, so weak. For the first time, she loved, and she did not give herself up, because, precisely, it would have spoiled her love, to be immediately with this one, in the same way that she had belonged to the other two… His unconscious desire was to prolong this delicious sensation forever, to become very young again, before the defilement, to have a good friend, as one has at fifteen, and that we kiss full on the lips behind the doors. He, apart from moments of fever, had no demands, lent himself to this voluptuously deferred happiness. Like her, he seemed to be returning to childhood, beginning to love, which until then had been a dread to him. If he showed himself docile, withdrawing his hands as soon as she pushed them aside, it was because a dull fear remained at the bottom of his tenderness, a great turmoil, where he feared to confuse desire with his old need for murder… This one, who had killed, was like the dream of his flesh. Her recovery every day seemed more certain to him, since he had held her around his neck for hours, than his mouth, on his, drank his soul, without his furious desire awakening to be its master by slaughtering it. But he still did n't dare; and it was so good to wait, to leave it to their very love to unite them, when the moment came, in the fainting of their will, in each other's arms. Thus, the happy dates followed one another, they never tired of meeting again for a moment, of walking together through the darkness, between the great piles of coal which darkened the night around them.

One night in July, Jacques, to arrive at Le Havre at eleven five, the regular time, had to push the Lison, as if the the stifling heat would have made her lazy. From Rouen, on its left, a storm accompanied it, following the valley of the Seine, with large dazzling lightning; and, from time to time, he would turn round, taken with anxiety, because Severine, that evening, was to come and join him. His fear was that this storm, if it broke too soon, would prevent him from going out. So, when he had managed to get into the station, before the rain, he grew impatient with the travelers, who kept clearing the cars.

Roubaud was there, on the quay, nailed down for the night.

—Devil! he said laughing, you are in a hurry to go to bed… Sleep well.

—Thank you.

And Jacques, after having driven back the train, whistled and went to the depot. The leaves of the immense door were open, the Lison rushed

under the closed hangar, a sort of gallery with two lanes, about seventy meters long, and which could contain six machines. It was very dark there, four gas lamps scarcely lit the darkness, which they seemed to increase with great moving shadows; and only, at times, the large lightning ignited the glazing of the roof and the high windows, to the right and to the left: one could distinguish then, as in an outbreak of fire, the cracked walls, the black frames of coal, all the misery obsolete of this building, become insufficient. Two machines were already there, cold, asleep.

Immediately, Pecqueux began to extinguish the hearth. It poked violently, and embers, escaping from the ashtray, fell below, in the pit.

“I’m too hungry, I’m going to have a snack,” he said. Are you in?

Jacques did not answer. In spite of his haste, he did not want to leave the Lison, until the fires were overturned and the boiler emptied. It was a scruple, a habit of a good mechanic, from which he never departed. When he had time, he did not even go away until he had visited it, wiped it down, with the care taken in dressing a favorite animal.

The water flowed into the pit in a big boil, and only then did he say:

“Let’s hurry, let’s hurry.”

A tremendous clap of thunder cut him short. This time, the high windows, against the flaming sky, had detached so clearly that one could have counted the broken windows, very numerous. To the left, alongside the vices, which were used for repairs, a sheet of tin, left standing, echoed with the persistent vibration of a bell. The entire ancient roof frame had cracked.

—Bugger! the driver said simply.

The mechanic made a gesture of despair. It was over, especially since, now, a torrential rain fell on the hangar. The rolling downpour threatened to puncture the glass roof. Up there, too, the windows must have been broken, for it was raining on the Lison, big drops, in bundles. A furious wind came in through the doors left open, it looked like the carcass of the old building was going to be washed away.

Pecqueux finished adjusting the machine.

—Here! we will see clearly tomorrow… No need to make him more toilet…

And, coming back to his idea:-

You have to eat… It’s raining too much, to go to stick on his mattress.

The canteen, in fact, was there, against the deposit itself; while the Company had to rent a house, rue François-Mazeline, where beds were installed for the mechanics and drivers who spent the night in Le Havre. In such a deluge, we would have had time to be soaked to the skin.

Jacques had to make up his mind to follow Pecqueux, who had taken the little basket from his boss, as if to save him the trouble of carrying it. He knew that this basket still contained two slices of cold veal, some bread, a barely opened bottle; and that was just what made him hungry. The rain redoubled, a clap of thunder had again shaken the shed. When the two men left, to the left, by the small door which led to the canteen, the Lison was already cooling. She fell asleep, abandoned, in the darkness illuminated by the violent lightning, under the large drops that soaked her loins. Near her, a water intake, poorly closed, flowed and maintained a pond, flowing between its wheels, in the pit.

But, before entering the canteen, Jacques wanted to wash off. There was always hot water there, in a room, with tubs. He drew a soap from his basket, he scrubbed his hands and face, black from the trip; and, as he took the precaution, recommended to the mechanics, of taking a change of clothes, he was able to change from head to toe, as he did, moreover, out of coquetry, every evening of meeting, arriving at Le Havre. Already, Pecqueux was waiting in the canteen, having washed only the tip of his nose and the tips of his fingers.

This canteen consisted simply of a small bare room, painted in yellow, where there was only a stove to heat the food, and a table, sealed to the floor, covered with a sheet of zinc, as a tablecloth. Two benches completed the furniture. The men had to bring their food, and ate on paper, with the point of their knife. A large window lit up the room.

—There’s a dirty rain! cried Jacques, planting himself at the window.

Pecqueux was seated on a bench in front of the table.

—You’re not eating, then?

—No, old man, finish my bread and my meat, if your heart tells you… I am not hungry.

The other, without being asked, threw himself on the calf, finished the bottle. Often he had such deals, for his boss was a little eater; and he loved her more, in his dogged devotion, for all the crumbs he thus collected behind him. With his mouth full, he resumed, after a silence: “The rain,

what’s the matter, since we’re parked?” It is true that, if this continues, I will let you go, I will go next.

He laughed, because he was not hiding, he must have confide in his affair with Philomène Sauvagnat, so that he might not be surprised to see him go to bed so often on the nights when he was going to find her. As she occupied a room on the ground floor near the kitchen at her brother’s, all he had to do was knock on the shutter: she opened, he would come in with a stride, simply. It was through there, it was said, that all the teams at the station had jumped. But now she stuck with the driver, which was enough, it seemed.

—Name of God, name of God! Jacques swore silently, seeing the flood start again with more violence, after a lull.

Pecqueux, who held the last bite at the end of his knife meat, laughed again.

“Say, is it then that you were busy tonight?” Huh! the two of us can hardly blame us for wearing out the mattresses, over there, rue François-Mazeline.

Quickly, Jacques left the window.

—Why this?

“Lady, here you are like me, since this spring, not returning until two or three in the morning.”

He must have known something, maybe he had overheard a date. In each dormitory, the beds went in pairs, that of the driver next to that of the mechanic; because the existence of these two men, destined for such a close working relationship, was tightened as much as possible. Also n’ The latter noticed the irregular behavior of his boss, who had been very tidy until then.

“I have headaches,” said the mechanic at random. it makes me feel good to walk at night.

But already the driver was protesting.

—Oh! you know, you are quite free… What I am saying is for the joke… Even if you were bored one day, you should not be shy about contacting me; because I am good there, for whatever you want.

Without explaining more clearly, he allowed himself to take her hand, squeezed it to crush it, in the whole gift of his person. Then he crumpled up and threw away the oily paper that had wrapped the meat, put the empty

bottle back in the basket, did this little cleaning like a careful servant, accustomed to broom and sponge. And, as the rain persisted, although the thunderclaps had ceased:-

So, I'm off, I'll leave you to your business.

—Oh! said Jacques, since this continues, I am going to lie down on the cot.

It was, next to the depot, a room with mattresses, protected by canvas covers, where the men came to rest fully clothed when they had to wait in Le Havre for only three or four hours. In fact, as soon as he saw the driver disappear in the runoff, towards the Sauvagnat house, he risked himself in his turn, ran to the guardhouse. But he did not lie down, stood on the threshold of the wide open door, suffocated by the thick heat that reigned there. In the background, a mechanic, lying on his back, was snoring, his mouth widened.

A few more minutes passed, and Jacques could not resign himself to losing his hope. In his exasperation against this imbecile deluge, a mad desire grew to go all the same to the meeting, to at least have the joy of being there, him, if he no longer expected to find Séverine there. It was a throbbing of his whole body, he ended up going out in the downpour, he arrived at their favorite corner, followed the dark alley formed by the piles of coal. And, as the big drops, lashing from the face, blinded him, he pushed on to the tool shed, where, once already, he had taken shelter with her. It seemed to him that he would be less alone there.

Jacques was entering the deep darkness of this cubicle, when two light arms enveloped him, and warm lips rested on his lips. Severine was there.

—My God! you came?

—Yes, I saw the storm rise, I ran here, before the rain… How late you have been!

She sighed in a faltering voice, he had never had her so abandoned to his neck. She slipped, she found herself sitting on the empty bags, angle. And he, fallen close to her, without their arms having been untied, felt her legs crossing hers. They could not see each other, their breath enveloped them like a vertigo, in the annihilation of all that surrounded them.

But, under the ardent appeal of their kiss, the familiarity rose to their mouths, like the mixed blood of their hearts.

—You were expecting me…—

Oh! I was waiting for you, I was waiting for you…

And, immediately, from the first minute, almost without words, it was she who drew him with a shock, who forced him to take her. She had not foreseen this. When he arrived, she didn't even count that she would see him; and she was coming to be carried away in the unexpected joy of holding him, in a sudden and irresistible need to be his, without calculation or reasoning. It was because it had to be. The rain redoubled on the roof of the shed, the last train from Paris to enter the station passed, growling and whistling, shaking the ground.

When Jacques got up, he listened with surprise to the rolling downpour. Where was he then? And, as he found on the ground, under his hand, the handle of a hammer which he had felt as he sat down, he was inundated with happiness. So was it done? he had possessed Séverine and he had not taken this hammer to break her skull. She was his without a fight, instinctive desire to throw it on its back, dead, like a prey that one snatches from others. He no longer felt his thirst to avenge very old offenses of which he would have lost the exact memory, this grudge amassed from male to male, since the first deception deep in caves. No, the possession of this one was of a powerful charm, it had healed him, because he saw her other, violent in her weakness, covered with the blood of a man who made him like a breastplate of horror… She dominated him, he who had not dared. And it was with tender gratitude, a desire to melt into her, that he took her back in his arms.

Severine, too, abandoned herself, very happy, delivered from a struggle for which she no longer understood the reason. Why had she refused for so long? She had promised herself, she should have given herself, since there should only be pleasure and gentleness. Now she understood that she had always wanted to, even when it seemed so good to wait. Her heart, her body lived only on a need for absolute, continuous love, and it was a terrible cruelty, these events which threw her, terrified, to all these abominations. Until then, existence had abused her, in the mud, in the blood, with such violence that her beautiful blue eyes, naive, kept a widening of terror, under his tragic helmet of black hair. She had remained a virgin despite everything, she had just given herself for the first time to this boy, whom she adored, in the desire to disappear in him, to be her servant. She belonged to him, he could dispose of her, at his whim.

—Oh! my darling, take me, keep me, I only want what you want.

—No no! darling, you are the mistress, I am only here to love you and obey you.

Hours passed. The rain had long ceased, a great silence enveloped the station, disturbed only by a distant, indistinct voice, rising from the sea. still in each other's arms, when a shot put them to their feet, trembling. Day was about to appear, a pale stain whitened the sky above the mouth of the Seine. What was that shot? Their imprudence, this folly for having thus lingered, showed them, in a sudden imagination, the husband pursuing them with revolver shots.

—Do not go out! Wait, I'll see.

Jacques, cautiously, had advanced to the door. And there, in the still thick shadow, he heard a gallop of men approaching, he recognized the voice of Roubaud, who urged on the supervisors, shouting to them that there were three marauders, that he had seen them perfectly stealing coal. Since a few weeks especially, no night passed without that he would have the kind of hallucinations imaginary brigands. This time, under the influence of sudden fright, he had fired at random in the darkness.

—Quick quick! let's not stay there, whispered the young man. They're going to visit the shed… Save yourself!

With a great rush, they had recovered, choking with full arms, full lips. Then, Séverine, light, spun along the depot, protected by the vast wall; while he gently hid himself among the piles of coal. And it was about time, indeed, because Roubaud did indeed want to visit the shed. he swore the marauders had to be there. The supervisors' lanterns danced low to the ground. There was a quarrel. They all ended up heading back to the station, irritated by this useless pursuit.

And, as Jacques, reassured, made up his mind to go to bed at last in the Rue François-Mazeline, he was surprised to almost bump into Pecqueux, who was finishing his clothes up, with deaf curses.

—What is it, old man?

—Ah! For God Sake! don't talk to me about it! It was these imbeciles who woke Sauvagnat. He heard me with his sister, he got down in his shirt, and I hurried to jump out the window… Here! listen a little.

Cries and sobs of a woman to be corrected were raised, while a heavy male voice growled insults.

—Hey? that’s it, he stretches his beating. She may be thirty-two, but he whips her like a little girl, when he surprises her… Ah! too bad, I do not interfere: it is his brother!

“But,” said Jacques, “I thought he tolerated you, that he only got angry when he found her with another.”

—Oh! we never know. Sometimes he pretends not to see me. Then, you hear, sometimes he bangs… that doesn’t stop him from loving his sister. She is his sister, he would rather let go of everything than part with her. wants driving… God damn it! I think she has her account today.

The screams ceased, with deep sighs of complaint, and the two men walked away. Ten minutes later, they were sleeping soundly, side by side, at the end of the little yellow- slathered dormitory, simply furnished with four beds, four chairs and a table, where there was a single zinc bowl.

So, each night of meeting, Jacques and Séverine tasted great happiness. They did not always have this protection from the storm around them. Starry skies, dazzling moons, bothered them, but at these rendezvous they spun in the streaks of shadow, darkness, where it felt so good to huddle together. And there were thus, in August and in September, adorable nights, of such sweetness, that they would have let themselves be surprised by the sun, languid, if the awakening of the station, of distant breaths of machine, not them. had separated. Even the first cold of October did not displease them. She came more covered, wrapped in a large cloak, in which he himself half disappeared. Then they barricaded themselves at the back of the tool shed, which he had found a way to close inside, using an iron bar. They felt at home there, the hurricanes of November, slate roofs, without even touching the back of their necks. However, he, since the first evening, had a desire, that of having her at home, in that narrow lodging where she seemed other, more desirable to him, with the smiling calm of an honest bourgeois; and she had always refused to do so, less for fear of spying on the corridor, than in a final scruple of virtue, reserving the marriage bed. But, one Monday, in broad daylight, as he was to have lunch there and the husband was slow to get in, held up by the station master, he joked, carried her to this bed, in a madness of recklessness at which they both laughed; so that they forgot themselves there. From then on, she no longer resisted, he went up to join her after midnight struck, on Thursdays and Saturdays. It was horribly dangerous: they dared not move, because of the neighbors;

they experienced a redoubled tenderness, new pleasures. Often, a whim of nocturnal errands, a need to flee like escaped animals, brought them back outside, into the black solitude of icy nights. In December, with a terrible frost, they fell in love there.

For four months already, Jacques and Séverine had lived like this, with a growing passion. They were both truly new, in the childhood of their hearts, that innocence astonished at first love, delighted with the slightest caresses. In them, continued the fight of submission, to whom would sacrifice himself more. He, no longer in doubt, had found the cure of his dreadful hereditary illness; for, since he had possessed it, the thought of the murder had no longer troubled him. Was it then that physical possession satisfied this need for death? Possessing, killing, was it the same, in the dark background of the human beast? He didn’t reason, too ignorant, didn’t try to crack the door a crack. Sometimes, in her arms, he rediscovered the sudden memory of what she had done, of that murder, confessed with a single gaze, on the bench in the Square des Batignolles; and he didn’t even want to know the details. She, on the contrary, seemed more and more tormented by the need to say everything. When she hugged him, he felt that she was swollen and panting with his secret, that she wanted to enter him only to relieve herself of the thing she was suffocating. It was a great shiver which left her loins, which lifted her lover’s throat, in the confused stream of sighs rising to her lips. The expiring voice, in the middle of a spasm, was she not going to speak? But, quickly, with a kiss, he closed his mouth, sealed the confession, seized with concern. Why put this stranger between them? could we say that this would not change nothing to their happiness? He sensed danger, a shudder came over him again, at the idea of stirring up these bloody stories with her. And she guessed it no doubt, she was becoming again, against him, caressing and docile, a creature of love, made only to love and be loved. A madness of possession then carried them away, they sometimes remained unconscious in each other’s arms.

Roubaud had grown even thicker since the summer, and as his wife returned to the gaiety, to the freshness of her twenty years, she grew older, seemed darker. In four months, as she said, he had changed a lot. He always gave Jacques cordial handshakes, invited him, than when he had it at his table. However, this distraction was no longer sufficient for him, he often went out, after the last bite, sometimes left the comrade with his wife, under

the pretext that he was suffocating and that he needed to go out for some fresh air. The truth was that now he frequented a little café in the Cours Napoléon, where he met up with M. Cauche, the superintendent. He drank little, small glasses of rum; but a taste for gambling had come to him, which turned to passion. He only revived himself, forgot everything except cards in his hand, stuck in endless games of stake. Mr. Cauche, a frenzied gamer, had decided that we would interest the parts; they had come to gamble a hundred sous; and, consequently, Roubaud, astonished not to know himself, had burned of the rage of the gain, that hot fever of the gained money, which ravages a man until it makes him risk his situation, his life, in a sudden of dice. Until then, his service had not suffered as a result: he would escape as soon as he was free, not return until two or three in the morning, on nights when he was not awake. His wife did not complain about it, she only reproached him for coming home more gloomy; because he had an extraordinary bad luck, he ended up getting into debt.

One evening, a first quarrel broke out between Séverine and Roubaud. Without still hating him, she came to bear it with difficulty, for she felt him weighing on her life, she would have been so light, so happy, if he had not overwhelmed her with his presence! Besides, she felt no remorse at deceiving him: wasn’t it her fault, hadn’t he almost pushed her to the fall? In their slow disunity, to heal from this discomfort which disorganized them, each of them consoled himself, cheered up as he pleased. Since he had the game, she might well have a lover. But what annoyed her above all, what she did not accept without revolt, was the embarrassment in which her continual losses put her. during Napoleon, she sometimes did not know how to pay her laundress. All kinds of sweets, small toiletries, were missing. And that night it was precisely about the necessary purchase of a pair of boots that they got into a quarrel. He, on the verge of going out, not finding a table knife to cut a piece of bread, had taken the large knife, the weapon, which was lying in a drawer of the sideboard. She looked at him, while he refused the fifteen francs for the boots, not having them, not knowing where to get them; she repeated his request, obstinately, forcing him to repeat his refusal, little by little exasperated; but all of a sudden she showed him with her finger at the place on the floor where specters were sleeping, she told him that there was money there, and that she wanted it. He turned very pale, he let go of the knife, which fell back into the drawer. For a moment she

thought he was going to beat her, for he had approached, stammering that that money could rot, that he would cut off his hand rather than take it back; and he clenched his fists, he threatened to knock her out, if she took it into her head, during his absence, to lift the frieze, to steal only a penny. Never never! it was dead and buried! But she, moreover, had turned pale too, faltering at the thought of digging there. Misery could come, both of you would starve next door. Indeed, they did not speak about it any more, even on the days of great embarrassment. When they set foot there, the burning sensation had grown, so intolerable that they ended up making a detour.

Then, other disputes arose, about the Croix-de-Maufras. Why weren't they selling the house? and they accused each other of doing nothing that was necessary to hasten this sale. He, violently, still refused to deal with it; while she, the rare times that she wrote to Misard, only obtained vague answers: no buyer showed up, the fruits had sunk, the vegetables did not grow due to lack of watering. Little by little, the great calm in which the household had fallen after the crisis was thus disturbed, seemed carried away by a terrible resumption of fever. All the germs of discomfort, the hidden money, the introduced lover, had grown, separated them now, irritated them against each other. And, in this growing turmoil, life was to become hell.

Besides, as if by a fatal backlash, everything was going badly around the Roubauds. A new flurry of gossip and discussion was blowing in the hallway. Philomène had just broken off violently with Madame Lebleu, following a calumny of the latter, who accused him of having sold him a hen that had died of illness. But the real reason for the break was in a rapprochement between Philomène and Séverine. Pecqueux having recognized this one night in Jacques' arm, she had silenced her former scruples, she had been kind to the chauffeur's mistress; and Philomène, very flattered by this affair with a lady who was the beauty and indisputable distinction of the station, had just turned against the cashier's wife, that old beggar, she said, capable of making mountains beat. She gave him all the blame, she shouted everywhere, at this hour, that housing on the street belonged to the Roubauds, that it was an abomination not to return it to them. Things were therefore beginning to turn out very badly for Madame Lebleu, all the more so as her relentlessness to watch for Mademoiselle Guichon, in order to surprise her with the station master, also threatened to

cause her serious trouble: she still did not surprise them, but she made the mistake of allowing herself to be surprised, her ears strained, glued to the doors; so much so that M. Dabadie, exasperated at being spied on in this way, had told sous-chef Moulin that, if Roubaud still demanded accommodation, he was ready to countersign the letter. And Moulin, usually not very talkative, having repeated this, we almost had to fight at the door at the door, from one end of the corridor to the other, so many passions were rekindled.

In the midst of these increasing tremors, Séverine only had one good day, Friday. Since October, she had had the quiet audacity to invent a pretext, the first comer, a pain in the knee, which required the care of a specialist; and, every Friday, she left by the six- forty in the morning express, which Jacques drove, she spent the day with him in Paris, then returned by the six -thirty express. At first, she had felt obliged to give her husband news of her knee: he was better, he was worse; then, seeing that he does had completely stopped talking to him about it. And sometimes she looked at him, she wondered if he knew. How did this ferocious jealous man, this man who had killed, blinded with blood, in an imbecile rage, come to tolerate a lover for him? She couldn’t believe it, she just thought he was getting stupid.

In the first days of December, on a freezing night, Séverine waited for her husband very late. The next day, a Friday, before dawn, she was to take the express; and, on those evenings, she usually washed carefully, got her clothes ready, so that she could be dressed immediately, when she got out of bed. Finally, she went to bed, finally fell asleep, around one o’clock. Roubaud had not returned. Already twice, he had reappeared only at dawn, all with his growing passion, no longer being able to tear himself away from the café, of which a small room, at the back, was gradually changing into a real gambling den. was playing big sums now, on the sidelines. Happy to sleep alone, rocked by the expectation of her good day the next day, the young woman was sleeping soundly, in the soft warmth of the blankets.

But three o’clock was about to strike, when a strange noise awakened her. At first she could not understand, thought she was dreaming, fell asleep again. They were heavy weighings, the crackling of wood, as if someone had wanted to force open a door. a more violent tear, put her to her feet.

And a fear overwhelmed her: someone, for sure, was popping the lock in the hallway. For a minute, she dared not move, listening, her ears ringing. Then she had the courage to get up to see; she walked silently, barefoot, she opened the door of her room gently, seized with such cold that she was quite pale and thin still, under her shirt; and the sight she saw in the dining-room nailed her with surprise and terror.

On the ground, Roubaud, sprawled on his stomach, lifted up on his elbows, had just torn off the frieze, using a chisel. A candle, posed near him, lit it, casting its enormous shadow up to the ceiling. And at that moment, his face bent over the hole that carved a black slit in the floor, he was watching, his eyes widened. The blood was purifying his cheeks, he had the face of a murderer. Abruptly, he plunged his hand, found nothing, in the shiver which agitated him, must have approached the candle. In the background appeared the purse, the banknotes, the watch.

Séverine gave an involuntary cry, and Roubaud, terrified, turned around. For a moment he did not recognize her, no doubt believed he was a specter, seeing her all white, with her eyes of terror.

—What are you doing? she asked.

So, understanding, avoiding answering, he only let out a low growl. He looked at her, embarrassed by her presence, eager to send her back to bed. But not a reasonable word came to him, he just found her slapping, shivering like that, quite naked.

—Is not it? she continued, “you refuse me boots, and you take the money for yourself, because you have lost.”

This suddenly enraged him. Was she going to spoil his life again, get in the way of his pleasure, this woman he no longer wanted, whose possession was no more than an unpleasant shock? Since he was having fun elsewhere, he didn’t need her. Again he searched, purse, containing the three hundred gold francs. And when, with his heel, he had put the frieze back in place, he came and threw in her face, clenched teeth: “You bother me, I do what I want.” Am I asking you, me, what are you going to do, later, in Paris?

Then, with a furious shrug, he returned to the cafe, leaving the candle on the floor.

Séverine picked it up, went back to bed, frozen to the core; and she kept it on, not being able to go back to sleep, waiting for the hour of the express, little by little scorching, her eyes wide open. It was certain now, there had

been a gradual disorganization, like an infiltration of crime, which decomposed this man, and who had rotten all bond, between them. Roubaud knew.

VII

That Friday, the travelers who were to take the 6:40 A.M. express at Le Havre woke up with a cry of surprise: the snow had been falling since midnight, in flakes so thick, so thick, that there was had in the streets a layer of thirty centimeters.

Already, under the covered hall, the Lison was puffing, smoking, harnessed to a train of seven wagons, three second-class and four first. When, around half-past five, Jacques and Pecqueux had arrived at the depot for the visit, they had grunted with concern at the stubborn snow, which the black sky was bursting. And now, at their post, they waited for the whistle, their eyes far away, beyond the gaping porch of the Marchioness, watching the silent and endless fall of the snowflakes streak the shadows with a livid shudder.

The mechanic murmured:

“The devil will take me if you see a signal!”

—Even if we can pass! said the driver.

Roubaud was on the quay, with his lantern, returned at the exact minute to take up his duty. From time to time his bruised eyelids closed with fatigue, without his ceasing to watch. Jacques having asked him if he knew nothing of the state of the track, he had just approached and hugged him. hand, replying that he had no dispatch yet; and, as Severine was coming down, wrapped in a large cloak, he himself led her to a first-class compartment, where he installed her. No doubt he had caught the look of worried tenderness exchanged between the two lovers; but he did not even bother to tell his wife that it was unwise to leave in such weather, and that she had better postpone her trip.

Travelers arrived, bundled up, laden with suitcases, all in a rush in the terrible morning cold. The snow from the shoes didn’t even melt; and the doors were closed immediately, everyone was barricaded, the platform remained desert, poorly lit by the shady gleams of a few gas lamps; while the beacon of the machine, hanging from the base of the fireplace, blazed

alone, like a giant eye, widening in the distance, in the darkness, its sheet of fire.

But Roubaud raised his lantern, giving the signal. The chief driver whistled, and Jacques answered, after having opened the regulator and put forward the small steering wheel of the shift. We were leaving. For another minute, the sous-chef quietly followed the train which was moving away under the storm.

—And be careful! Jacques said to Pecqueux. No joke today!

He had noticed that his companion seemed, too, to fall from weariness: the result, surely, of some wedding the day before.

—Oh! no danger, no danger! the driver stammered.

Immediately, as soon as they left the covered hall, the two men had entered the snow. The wind was blowing from the east, the machine was thus upwind, whipped from the face by the gusts; and, behind the shelter, they did not suffer too much at first, dressed in coarse wool, their eyes protected by glasses. But, in the night, the dazzling light of the lantern was as if eaten up by these pale layers which fell. Instead of lighting up two or three hundred yards away, the track appeared under a sort of milky fog, where things only emerged very close together, as well as from the depths of a dream. And, according to his fear, what raised the concern of the mechanic to its height was to note, from the fire of the first cantonment post, that he would certainly not see, at the prescribed distance, the red signals, closing the way. From then on, he advanced with extreme caution, without however being able to slow down, for the wind opposed him with enormous resistance, and any delay would have become such a great danger.

As far as Harfleur station, the Lison made a good continuous march. Jacques was not yet worried about the layer of snow that had fallen, for there was no more than two feet, and the snowplow easily cleared a meter. He was concerned with keeping his speed, knowing full well that the true quality of a mechanic, after temperance and love for his machine, consisted in walking in a regular manner, without jerking, at the highest possible pressure… Even his only flaw was there, in a stubbornness not to stop, disobeying signals, always believing that he would have time to tame the Lison: also, sometimes, he went too far, crushed the firecrackers, the corns', as they say, which earned him twice layoffs of eight days. But at that

moment, in the great danger in which he felt, the thought that Séverine was there, that he was in charge of this dear existence, increased tenfold the strength of his will, stretched all over there, as far as Paris, along this double iron line, in the midst of the obstacles he had to overcome.

And, standing on the sheet metal which connected the machine to the tender, in the continual jolts of trepidation, Jacques, despite the snow, leaned to the right, the better to see. Through the window of the shelter, cloudy with water, he could make out nothing; and his face remained beneath the squalls, his skin scourged with thousands of needles, pinched with such cold that it smelled like razor cuts. From time to time he would withdraw to catch his breath; he took off his glasses, wiped them; then he came back to his vantage point, in the middle of a hurricane, his eyes fixed, waiting for the red lights, so absorbed in his will, that on two occasions he had the hallucination of sudden bloody sparks, staining the pale curtain which trembled in front of him.

But all of a sudden, in the darkness, a sensation warns him that his driver was no longer there. Only a small lantern illuminated the water level, so that no light could blind the mechanic; and, on the dial of the manometer, the enamel of which seemed to retain a clean glow, he had seen that the blue needle, trembling, was falling rapidly. It was the falling fire. The driver had just sprawled out on the trunk, sleep.

—Sacred reveler! Jacques cried furiously, shaking him.

Pecqueux stood up, apologized, with an unintelligible groan. He was barely standing; but the force of habit immediately put him back to the fire, hammer in hand, breaking the coal, spreading it on the grate with the shovel, in a very even layer; then he brushed it off. And, while the door of the hearth remained open, a blaze of furnace, back on the train, like a flaming tail of a comet, had set the snow on fire, raining through it, in large drops of gold.

After Harfleur, began the great ramp of three leagues which goes to Saint-Romain, the steepest of the whole line. Also the mechanic he resumed the maneuver, very attentive, expecting a strong blow of collar, to go up this hill, already rough by the beautiful weather. With his hand on the shift wheel, he watched the telegraph poles flee, trying to figure out the speed. This decreased a lot, the Lison was running out of steam, while one guessed the friction of the snowplows, with increasing resistance. He opened the

door with the tip of his foot; and the driver, sleepy, understood, started the fire again, in order to increase the pressure. Now the door was blushing, lighting up both of their legs with a purple glow. But they did not feel its fiery heat, in the icy draft that enveloped them. On a gesture from his boss, the driver had also just lifted the stem of the ashtray, which activated the draft. Quickly, the manometer needle had risen to ten atmospheres, the Lison was giving all the force of which she was capable. Even for a moment, seeing the water level drop, the mechanic had to move the small flywheel of the injector, although this reduced the pressure. She got up, moreover, the machine was roaring, spitting, like an animal being overworked, with jolts, thrusts, where one would have thought to hear its limbs cracking. And he bullied her, like an aged and less strong woman, no longer having the same tenderness for her than before.

“She will never come up, the slacker!” he said, his teeth clenched, he who did not speak on the way.

Pecqueux, astonished, in his drowsiness, looked at him. What did he have now against the Lison? Was it not always the brave obedient machine, so easy to start, that it was a pleasure to start it up, and of such a good vaporization, that it spared its tenth of coal, from Paris to Havre? When a machine had drawers like hers, perfectly adjusted, cutting off the steam miraculously, one could tolerate all imperfections, as what a quinteuse housewife might say, having both driving and economy on her side. that she was spending too much fat. And then after? We greased it, that’s all!

Exactly, Jacques repeated, exasperated:

“It will never go up if we don’t grease it.”

And, which he had not done three times in his life, he took the cruet, to grease it on the move. Stepping over the ramp, he climbed onto the apron, which he followed all the way up to the boiler. But it was a most perilous maneuver: his feet slipped on the narrow strip of iron, wet with snow; and he was blinded, and the terrible wind threatened to sweep him away like a straw. La Lison, with this man clinging to her side, continued her panting course, through the night, among the immense white layer, where it opened a deep groove. She shook him, carried him away. Having reached the front cross member, he crouched down in front of the grease bucket of the right cylinder, he had all the trouble in the world to fill it, while holding on to the rod with one hand. Then he had to go around, like a crawling insect, to

grease the left cylinder. And when he returned, exhausted, he was quite pale, having felt death pass.

—Dirty bitch! he whispered.

Seized by this unusual violence towards their Lison, Pecqueux could not help saying, once again venturing his usual joke:

—I had to let go: it knows me, me, to grease the ladies.

Awake a little, he too had returned to his post, watching the left side of the line. Usually he had good eyes, better than his boss's. But, in this turmoil, everything had disappeared, hardly could they, nevertheless to whom each kilometer of the road was so familiar, recognize the places which they crossed: the road sank under the snow, the hedges, the houses they they seemed to be swallowed up, it was nothing more than a low and endless plain, a chaos of vague whiteness, where the Lison seemed to gallop at will, seized with madness. And the two men had never felt the bond of brotherhood that united them, on this machine in motion, unleashed through all perils, where they found themselves more alone, more abandoned in the world, than in a closed room, with the aggravating, the crushing responsibility the lives they dragged behind them.

So Jacques, whom Pecqueux's joke had finished irritating, he finally smiled, restraining the anger that was winning him over. It was certainly not the time to quarrel. The snow redoubled, the curtain thickened on the horizon. We were still going up, when the driver, in his turn, thought he saw a red light flashing in the distance. With a word, he warns his boss. But already he could not find it anymore, his eyes had dreamed, as he sometimes said. And the mechanic, who had seen nothing, remained with a pounding heart, troubled by this hallucination of another, losing confidence in himself. What he imagined he could distinguish, beyond the pale swarm of flakes, were immense black shapes, considerable masses, like giant pieces of the night, which seemed to move and come in front of the sea. machine. Were they collapsed hills, mountains blocking the way, where the train was going to break? Then, seized with fear, he pulled the rod of the whistle, he whistled for a long time, desperately; and this lament dragged on, dismal, through the storm. Then he was astonished to have whistled at the appropriate time, for the train was crossing Saint-Romain station at high speed, from which he thought he was two kilometers away.

However, the Lison, who had climbed the terrible ramp, began to roll more easily, and Jacques could breathe for a moment. From Saint-Romain to Bolbec, the line goes up insensibly, everything would probably go well to the other end of the plateau. When he was at Beuzeville, during the three-minute stop, he nonetheless called the station master whom he saw on the platform, insisting on telling him his fears, in front of this snow, the layer of which was still increasing. : he never it would be better to double the team, by adding a second machine, while we were at a depot, where machines available were always ready. But the station master replied that he had no orders and that he did not believe he had to take this measure on him. All he offered was to give five or six wooden shovels, to clear the rails, if needed. And Pecqueux took the shovels, which he put away in a corner of the tender.

On the plateau, in fact, the Lison continued her walk with good speed, without too much difficulty. She was getting bored, however. At any moment, the mechanic had to make his gesture, open the door of the hearth, so that the driver can put coal; and, each time, above the dreary train, black in all its white, covered with a shroud, blazed the dazzling tail of a comet, piercing the night. It was quarter past seven, day was dawning; but the paleness of the sky could hardly be distinguished, in the immense whitish whirlpool which filled the space, from one end of the horizon to the other. This suspicious light, where nothing stood out as yet, worried the two men more, who, their eyes full of tears, despite their glasses, struggled to see into the distance. Without letting go of the gear change steering wheel, the mechanic never left the whistle rod, whistling almost continuously, out of prudence, with a whistle of distress that wept in the depths of this snowy desert.

We crossed Bolbec, then Yvetot, without incident. But, at Motteville, Jacques again called the deputy chief, who could not give him precise information on the state of the track. No train had yet come, a dispatch simply announced that the Paris omnibus was blocked in Rouen, in safety. And the Lison set off again, descending from her weighted pace and wearied the three leagues of gentle slope which go to Barentin. Now the day was breaking, very pale; and it seemed that this livid glow came from the snow itself. She was falling thicker, so than a cloudy and cold fall of dawn, drowning the earth in the debris of the sky. With the day increasing,

the wind redoubled in violence, the flakes were chased away like bullets, the driver had to take his shovel at every moment to clear the coal, at the bottom of the tender, between the walls of the water container… To the right and to the left, the countryside appeared, to such an unrecognizable point, that the two men had the sensation of fleeing in a dream: the vast flat fields, the rich pastures enclosed by living hedges, the courtyards planted with apple trees, were not there. more than a white sea, barely swelled by short waves, a pallid and trembling immensity, where everything faltered, in this whiteness. And the mechanic, standing, his face cut by the gusts, his hand on the steering wheel, was beginning to suffer terribly from the cold.

Finally, at the Barentin stop, the station master, Mr. Bessière, himself approached the machine, to warn Jacques that considerable quantities of snow were being reported on the Croix-de-Maufras side…

“I think we can still pass,” he added. But you will be sorry.

Then the young man got carried away.

—Thunder of God! I said it well, in Beuzeville! What could it do to them to overtake the team? … Ah! we are going to be nice!

The head driver had just got out of his van, also got angry. He was frozen in his lookout, he declared that he was unable to distinguish a signal from a telegraph pole. A real groping trip, in all this white!

“At last, you have been warned,” resumed M. Bessière.

However, the travelers were already astonished at this prolonged stop, in the midst of the great silence of the buried station, without the cry of an employee, without the banging of the door. Some mirrors were lowered, heads appeared: a very strong lady, with two young, charming, blond girls, her daughters no doubt, all three English certainly; and, farther on, a very pretty dark young woman, whom an elderly gentleman was forcing into; while two men, a young, an old, chatted from one car to another, their chests half out of the doors. But, as Jacques glanced back, he saw only Severine, also leaning over, looking in her direction, with an anxious air. Ah! the creature dear, she must be worried, and how heartbreaking it felt, to know there, so near and away from him in this danger! He would have given all his blood to be in Paris already, and to deposit it there safe and sound.

“Come on, go,” concluded the station master. There is no point in scaring the world.

He himself had given the signal. Getting back into his van, the chief driver whistled; and once again the Lison drove off, after answering, with a long cry of complaint.

Jacques immediately felt that the condition of the track was changing. It was no longer the plain, the endless unwinding of the thick carpet of snow, where the machine sped like a liner, leaving a wake. We entered the tormented country, the coasts and the valleys whose enormous swell went as far as Malaunay, bumping the ground; and the snow had gathered there in an irregular way, the way was cleared by places, while considerable masses had blocked certain passages. The wind, which swept the embankments, on the contrary filled the trenches. It was thus a continual succession of obstacles to overcome, bits of free way barred by real ramparts. It was broad daylight now, and the devastated country, these narrow gorges, these steep slopes, took, under their blanket of snow, the desolation of an ocean of ice, immobilized in the turmoil.

Jacques had never before felt such cold penetrate. Under the thousand needles of snow, his face seemed to him blood; and he was no longer aware of his hands, paralyzed by the fingernail, which had become so insensitive that he shuddered when he saw that he lost, between his fingers, the sensation of the small steering wheel when the gear shifted. When he raised his elbow, to pull the whistle rod, his arm weighed on his shoulder like the arm of death. He couldn’t tell if his legs were carrying him, in the continuous jolts of trepidation, which tore his insides out. An immense fatigue had invaded him, with this cold, the frost of which was gaining his head, and his fear was of no longer being any more, of not knowing if he was driving, because he was already turning the steering wheel only with a gesture mechanically, he watched, dazed, the pressure gauge come down. All the known stories of hallucinations crossed his mind. Wasn’t that a felled tree over there across the way? Hadn’t he seen a red flag flying above that bush? Of firecrackers, did they not explode every minute in the rumble of the wheels? He couldn’t have said it, he kept telling himself he should stop, and he couldn’t think of it. For a few minutes this crisis tortured him; then, suddenly, the sight of Pecqueux, who had fallen back asleep on the chest, overwhelmed by the overwhelming cold from which he himself suffered, threw him into such anger that he felt warmed by it.

—Ah! God damn it!

And he, usually so gentle with the vices of this drunkard, kicked him up and kicked him until he was on his feet. The other, numb, just growled, picking up his shovel.

—Candy! let’s go!

When the hearth was loaded, the pressure rose; and it was about time, the Lison had just entered the bottom of a trench, where she had to split a thickness of more than a meter. She advanced with an extreme effort, which made her all tremble. For a moment she was exhausted, it seemed as if she was going to come to a stop, like a ship that hit a sandbank. What loaded her was the snow, a heavy layer of which had gradually covered the roofs of the wagons. They were spinning like this, black in the white wake, with this white sheet stretched over them; and she herself had only edges of ermine, cladding her dark loins, where the flakes melted and streamed in rain. A once more, despite the weight, she freed herself, she passed. The along a wide curve on an embankment, we could still follow the train, which was advancing at ease, like a gray ribbon, lost amidst a land of legends, shining whiteness.

But farther on, the trenches began again, and Jacques and Pecqueux, who had felt the Lison touching, stiffened against the cold, standing at this post which, even dying, they could not desert. Again the machine was losing speed. It had entered between two embankments, and the stop came slowly, without jerking. It seemed that she was getting stuck, caught by all her wheels, more and more tightened, out of breath. She didn’t move. It was done, the snow held her helplessly.

“There it is,” scolded Jacques. Thunder of God!

A few more seconds, he remained at his post, his hand on the steering wheel, opening everything, to see if the obstacle would not give way. Then, hearing the Lison spitting and losing steam in vain, he closed the regulator, he cursed louder, furious.

The chief driver leaned over the door of his van, and Pecqueux showed up and shouted to him in turn:

“There we are, we’re stuck!”

Briskly, the driver jumped into the snow, which was up to his knees. He approached, the three men took advice.

“We can only try to clear away,” the mechanic said at last. Fortunately, we have shovels. Call your rear driver, and the four of us will clear the

wheels eventually.

The rear driver was waved, who had also got out of the van. He arrived with great difficulty, drowned at times. But this stop in the middle of the countryside, in the middle of this white solitude, this clear sound of voices discussing what to do, this employee jumping along the train, with painful strides, had worried the travelers. Ice is lowered. We shouted, we questioned, all a confusion, still vague and growing.

—Where are we? … Why have we stopped? … What is it ? … My God! is it a misfortune?

The driver felt the need to reassure the world. Just as he was coming forward, the English lady, whose thick red face was framed by the two charming faces of her daughters, asked him with a strong accent:

“Sir, isn’t that dangerous?”

“No, no, madame,” he replied. Just a little snow. We leave immediately.

And the mirror rose, amid the fresh chirping of young girls, that music of English syllables, so lively on pink lips. They were both laughing, very amused.

But, farther on, the elderly gentleman called the driver, while that his young wife was risking her pretty brown head behind him.

—How have we not taken precautions? It’s unbearable… I am coming back from London, my business is calling me in Paris this morning, and I am warning you that I will hold the Company responsible for any delay.

“Sir,” the employee could only repeat, “we’ll be leaving in three minutes.”

The cold was terrible, the snow was entering, and the heads disappeared, the windows rose. But, deep in the closed cars, an agitation persisted, an anxiety, the dull hum of which could be felt. Only two windows remained lowered; and, elbows, three compartments apart, two travelers were chatting, an American in his forties, a young man living in Le Havre, both very interested in the work of clearing.

—In America, sir, everyone comes down and takes shovels.

—Oh! it’s nothing, I have already been blocked twice, last year. My occupations call me every week in Paris.

“And I every three weeks or so, sir.

—How, from New York?

—Yes, sir, from New York.

Jacques was leading the work. Having seen Séverine at a door of the first carriage, where she always sat down to be nearer to him, he begged her with a look; and, including, she had withdrawn, so as not to remain in the icy wind which was burning her face. He, from then on, thinking of her, had worked wholeheartedly. But he noticed that the cause of the stoppage, the impasto in the snow, did not come from the wheels: these cut the thickest layers; it was the ashtray, placed between them, which stood in the way, rolling the snow, hardening it into enormous clumps. And an idea occurred to him.

—You have to unscrew the ashtray.

First, the head driver opposed it. The mechanic was under his orders, he did not want to allow him to touch the machine. Then he let himself be convinced.

—You take responsibility for it, it's good!

Only, it was a hard task. Lying under the machine, their backs in the melting snow, Jacques and Pecqueux had to work for nearly half an hour. Fortunately, in the toolbox, they had spare screwdrivers. Finally, at the risk of burning themselves and crashing twenty times, they succeeded in removing the ashtray. But they didn't have it yet, they had to get it out of there. Of enormous weight, it got confused in the wheels and cylinders. However, four of them pulled him, dragged him out of the way, to the embankment.

"Now let's finish clearing," said the driver.

For nearly an hour the train had been in distress, and the anguish of the travelers had increased. Every minute a mirror was lowered, a voice asking why we weren't leaving. It was panic, screams, tears, in a mounting fit of panic.

"No, no, it's pretty cleared up," said Jacques. Go upstairs, I'll take care of the rest.

He was back at his post, with Pecqueux, and when the two drivers had returned to their vans, he himself turned the valve on the drain. The hot, muffled jet of steam melted the bundles that still clung to the rails. Then, his hand behind the wheel, he backtracked. Slowly, he drew back about three hundred meters, to take of the field. And, having pushed into the fire, even exceeding the permitted pressure, he came back against the wall which barred the way, he threw the Lison there, with all her mass, with all the

weight of the train she was dragging. She had a han! terrible lumberjack who rams the ax, his strong iron and cast iron frame creaked. But she could not pass yet, she had stopped, smoking, all vibrating with shock. Then, on two more occasions, he had to start the maneuver again, stepped back, rushed into the snow, to win; and each time the Lison, stiffening her back, stumbled with her chest, with her giant-mad breath. Finally, she seemed to take breath, she bound her metal muscles in a supreme effort, and she passed, and heavily the train followed her, between the two walls of gutted snow. She was free.

—Good beast all the same! growled Pecqueux.

Jacques, blinded, took off his glasses and wiped them off. His heart was beating violently, he no longer felt the cold. But suddenly the thought came to him from a deep trench, which was about three hundred meters from Croix-de-Maufras: it opened in the direction of the wind, snow must have accumulated in it in quantity. considerable; and immediately he was certain that this was the marked reef where he would be wrecked. He bent. In the distance, after a last curve, the trench appeared to him, in a straight line, like a long pit, filled with snow. It was broad daylight, the whiteness was boundless and dazzling, under the continuous fall of the snowflakes.

However, the Lison sped at an average speed, having encountered no further obstacle. As a precaution, the front and rear lights were left on; and the white lantern at the base of the fireplace shone in the daylight like the living eye of a Cyclops. She was driving, she was approaching the trench, with that eye wide open. Then it seemed as if she began to breathe with a small short breath, like a frightened horse. From deep tremors shook her, she reared, not continued its march only under the voluntary hand of the mechanic. With a gesture, he opened the door of the fireplace, so that the driver would activate the fire. And now it was no longer a tail of a star burning in the night, it was a plume of thick black smoke that smeared the great pale shiver of the sky.

La Lison moved forward. Finally, he had to enter the trench. To the right and to the left, the embankments were drowned, and nothing could be seen of the track at the back. It was like a hollow of a torrent, where the snow was sleeping, with full edges. She engaged in it, rolled for about fifty meters, breathlessly, slower and slower. The snow that it pushed back, made a bar in front of her, boiled and rose, in a revolted flood which threatened to

engulf her. For a moment she seemed overwhelmed, defeated. But, with a last thrust, she freed herself, advanced another thirty meters. It was the end, the shock of agony: bundles of snow fell, covered the wheels, all the parts of the mechanism were invaded, linked one by one by chains of ice. And the Lison stopped definitively, expiring, in the great cold. Her breath died away, she was still, and dead.

“Here we are,” said Jacques. I expected that.

Immediately, he wanted to backtrack, to try to again the maneuver. But this time the Lison didn’t move. She refused to retreat as to advance, she was blocked on all sides, glued to the ground, inert, deaf. Behind her, the train, too, seemed dead, sunk in the thick layer to the doors. The snow did not stop, fell heavier, in long gusts. And it was a stagnation, where machine and cars would disappear, already half covered, under the shuddering silence of this white solitude. Nothing moved, the snow spun its shroud.

—Well, it starts again? the head driver asked, leaning out of the van.

—Damn! cried Pecqueux simply.

This time, in fact, the position was becoming critical. The rear conductor ran to put down the firecrackers which were to protect the train, in line; while the mechanic whistled wildly, hurriedly, the panting and dismal whistle of distress. But the snow deafened the air, the sound was lost, not even to reach Barentin. What to do? There were only four of them, they would never clear such piles. It would have taken a whole team. The necessity was imperative to run to seek help. And the worst was that panic broke out again among the travelers.

A door opened, the pretty brunette lady jumped in panic, believing in an accident. Her husband, the elderly merchant, who followed her, cried: “I will

write to the Minister, it is an indignity!”

The tears of women, the angry voices of men came out of the cars, the windows of which were violently lowered. And there were only the two little English girls who were cheering, looking calm, smiling. As the chief conductor was trying to reassure everyone, the youngest asked him, in French, with a slight British lisp:

“So, sir, is this where we stop?”

Several men had come down, despite the thick layer which was sinking to the stomach. The American found himself thus with the young man from

Le Havre, both of them having come forward to see the machine. They nodded.

“We have four or five hours, before we wash it off in there.”

—At least, and still it would take about twenty workers.

Jacques had just decided the head driver to send the rear driver to Barentin to ask for help. Neither he nor Pecqueux could leave the machine.

The employee walked away, they soon lost sight of him at the end of the trench. He had four kilometers to go, he wouldn’t be back for two hours perhaps. And Jacques, in despair, let go of his post for a moment, ran to the first carriage, where he saw Séverine, who had lowered the mirror.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said quickly. You don’t fear anything.

She replied in the same way, without calling him familiar, for fear of being overheard: “I am not afraid.” Only, I was very worried, because of you.

And it was so sweet that they were comforted and smiled at each other. But, as Jacques turned round, he was surprised to see, along the embankment, Flore, then Misard, followed by two other men, whom he did not recognize at first. They had heard the distress whistle, and Misard, who was not on duty, came running with the two comrades, to whom he offered the white wine, the quarryman Cabuche who was unemployed by the snow, and the switchman Ozil, who came from Malaunay through the tunnel, to pay court to Flore, whom he still pursued, despite the poor reception. Curiously, like a big vagabond girl, brave and strong as a boy, accompanied them. And, for her, for her father, it was a considerable event, an extraordinary adventure, this train thus stopping at their door. For five years they had lived there, every hour of the day and night, in fine weather, in storms, how many trains they had seen passing, in the gust of wind of their speed! All seemed carried away by this wind which brought them, never a only he had not even slowed down, they watched them flee, get lost, disappear, before having been able to know anything about them. The whole world marched past, the human crowd rushed along, without their knowing anything other than faces glimpsed in a flash, faces they were never to see again, sometimes faces that became familiar to them by dint of to find them on fixed days, and which for them remained nameless. And lo and behold, in the snow, a train disembarked at their door: the natural order was perverted, they stared at this unknown world that an accident threw on

the track, they contemplated it with the round eyes of savages, running up a hill. or some Europeans would be wrecked. These open doors showing women wrapped in furs, these men descended in thick overcoats, all that comfortable luxury, stranded among this sea of ice, immobilized them in astonishment.

But Flore had recognized Séverine. She, who watched Jacques' train every time, had noticed the presence of this woman for several weeks in the Friday morning express; especially since the latter, when she approached the level crossing, put her head to the door, to give a glance at her property of the Croix-de-Maufras. Flore's eyes darkened when she saw her talking in a low voice with the mechanic.

—Ah! Madame Roubaud! cried Misard, who had also just recognized her, and who immediately assumed his obsequious air. In this bad luck… but you're not going to stay there, you have to go home.

Jacques, after shaking hands with the gatekeeper, supported his offer.

—He is right… We may have it for hours, you would have time to freeze to death.

Severine refused, well covered, she said. Then the three hundred yards in the snow scared him a little. Then, approaching, Flore, who was looking at her with her large fixed eyes, said at last:

"Come, madame, I will carry you."

And, before the latter had accepted, she had seized her in her strong boyish arms, she lifted her like a small child. Then she put it down on the other side of the track, in a place already trampled, where the feet were no longer sinking. Some travelers had laughed, amazed. What a cheeky girl! If we had had a dozen like this, it would not have taken two hours to clear it out.

However, Misard's proposal, this gatekeeper's house, where one could take refuge, find fire, perhaps bread and wine, ran from one car to another. The panic had calmed down, when it was understood that was in no immediate danger; only, the situation was no less lamentable: the hot water bottles were cooling, it was nine o'clock, we were going to suffer from hunger and thirst, if help was delayed. And it could go on forever, who knew if we wouldn't sleep there? Two camps were formed: those who, in despair, did not want to leave the wagons, and who settled there as if to die there, wrapped in their blankets, lying furiously on the benches; and those

who preferred to risk the race through the snow, hoping to find something better there, especially eager to escape the nightmare of this stranded train, frozen to death. All a group formed, the elderly merchant and his young wife, the English lady with her two daughters, the young man from Le Havre, the American, a dozen others, ready to set out.

Jacques, in a low voice, had decided Severine, swearing to go and give him news, if he could escape. And, as Flore was still looking at them with her dark eyes, he spoke to her softly, like an old friend:-

Well! it is understood, you will drive these ladies and these gentlemen… Me, I keep Misard, with the others. We'll get on with it, we'll do what we can, while we wait.

Immediately, indeed, Cabuche, Ozil, Misard had taken shovels, to join Pecqueux and the head driver, who were already attacking the snow. The small team struggled to free the machine, rummaging under the wheels, throwing the shovelfuls against the embankment. No one opened their mouths any more, all you could hear was this silent rage in the dreary suffocation of the white countryside. And, when the little troop of travelers left, they had a last glance at the train, which remained alone, showing only a thin black line, under the thick layer which crushed it. The doors had been closed, the windows raised. The snow was still falling, buried him slowly, surely, with mute obstinacy.

Flore had wanted to take Séverine back in her arms. But the latter had refused, insisting on walking like the others. The three hundred meters were very painful to cross: in the trenches especially, we sank up to the hips; and on two occasions it was necessary to operate the rescue of the fat English lady, half submerged. Her daughters were still laughing, delighted. The old man's young wife, having slipped, had to accept the hand of the young man from Le Havre; while her husband ranted against France, with the American. When they left the trenches, the walk became more comfortable; but we were following an embankment, the small troop advanced on a line, blown by the wind, carefully avoiding edges, waves and dangerous under the snow. Finally, we arrived, and Flore installed the travelers in the kitchen, where she could not even give them a seat each, because there were about twenty of them cluttering the room, which fortunately was quite large. All she invented was to go get some planks and set up two benches, using the chairs she had. Then she threw a bourrée into the hearth, then she

made a gesture, as if to say that no more should be asked of her. She had not spoken a word, she remained standing, gazing at the world with her large greenish eyes, with her fierce and bold air of greatness. blonde savage. Only two faces were known to him, having often noticed them at the doors for months: that of the American and that of the young man from Le Havre; and she examined them, as one studies the buzzing insect, finally posed, which one could not follow in its flight. They seemed strange to her, she hadn't imagined them precisely that way, without knowing anything about them, beyond their features. As for the other people, they seemed to her to be of a different race, inhabitants of an unknown land, fallen from the sky, bringing home, to the bottom of her kitchen, clothes, customs, ideas, which she did not know. never thought I would have seen it. The Lady English confided to the young wife of the merchant that she was going to join her eldest son, a senior civil servant in India; and she was joking about her bad luck, for the first time she had had the whim of accompanying her husband to London, who went there twice a year. Everyone lamented at the idea of being stranded in this desert: we should eat, we should go to bed, how would we do, my God! And Flore, who listened to them motionless, having met Séverine's gaze, seated on a chair in front of the fire, made a sign to her, to let her pass into the next room.

"Mom," she announced as she entered, "it's Mme Roubaud… You have nothing to say to her?"

Phasie was lying down, her face yellow, her legs swollen, so ill that she had not left bed for two weeks; and, in the poor room, where a cast iron stove maintained a stifling heat, she spent the hours rolling the obsession with her stubbornness, having no other distraction than the jolting of the trains, at full speed.

—Ah! Madame Roubaud, she whispered, good, good!

Flore told him about the accident, told him about this world she had brought and which was there. But all this no longer touched her.

—Candy! she repeated, in the same weary voice.

Yet she remembered, she raised her head for a moment, to say:

—If madame wants to go and see her house, you know that the keys are hung near the cupboard.

But Séverine refused. A shiver had seized her at the thought of returning to Croix-de-Maufras, through this snow, under this livid light. No, no, she

had nothing to do with it, she preferred to stay there, waiting, warmly.

“Sit down, madame,” continued Flore. It is even better here than next door. Besides, we’ll never find enough bread for all these people; while, if you are hungry, there will always be a piece for you.

She had brought a chair forward, she continued to be considerate, making a visible effort to correct her harshness. ordinary. But her eyes never left the young woman, as if she wanted to read her, to be certain about a question she had been asking herself for some time; and, beneath her eagerness, there was this need to approach her, to stare at her, to touch her, in order to know.

Séverine thanked her and settled herself near the stove, preferring, in fact, to be alone with the patient, in this room, where she hoped that Jacques would find a way to join her. Two hours passed, she was giving in to the hot heat, and was falling asleep, after talking about the country, when Flore, called every moment into the kitchen, reopened the door, saying in her harsh voice:

—Come in, since she’s around here!

It was Jacques, who was escaping, to bring good news. The man, sent to Barentin, had just brought back a whole team, some thirty soldiers whom the administration had directed to the threatened points, in anticipation of accidents; and all were at work, with pickaxes and shovels. Only, it would take a long time, we might not leave before nightfall.

“Finally, you are not too bad, have patience,” he added. Won’t you, Aunt Phasie, you’re not going to let Madame Roubaud starve?

Phasie, at the sight of her big boy, as she called him, had struggled to sit up, she listened to him talk, revived, happy. When he approached his bed:-

Of course, of course! she declared. Ah! my big boy, there you are! it’s you who got caught in the snow! … And this beast that doesn’t warn me!

She turned to her daughter, she said:

“At least be polite, go find these gentlemen and ladies, take care of them so that they don’t tell the administration that we are savages.”

Flore had remained planted between Jacques and Séverine. For a moment she seemed to hesitate, wondering if she wasn’t going to be stubbornly there, despite her mother. But she wouldn’t see anything, the her presence would prevent the other two from betraying each other; and she left without a word, enveloping them with a long look.

—How? “Or” What! Aunt Phasie, “resumed Jacques with an expression of sorrow,” you are quite in bed, is it serious?

She attracted him, even forced him to sit on the edge of the mattress, and without worrying about the young woman, who had stepped aside out of discretion, she relieved herself, in a very low voice.

—Oh! Yes seriously! It’s a miracle if you find me alive… I did not want to write to you, because these things can not be written… I almost did; but now things are already better, and I think I will survive again.

He examined her, afraid of the progress of the evil, finding nothing in her of the beautiful and healthy creature of old.

“So still your cramps and dizziness, my poor Aunt Phasie.”

But she squeezed his hand to break it, she continued, lowering her voice more:-

Imagine that I surprised him… You know that I gave my tongue to the dogs, not to know in what he could give me his drugs. I didn’t drink, I didn’t eat anything he touched, and all the same, every night my stomach was on fire… Well! he stuck it to me in salt, his drug! One evening, I saw him… I put it on everything, quantities, to purify!

Jacques, since the possession of Séverine seemed to have cured him, sometimes thought of this story of poisoning, slow and obstinate, as one thinks of a nightmare, with doubts. He tenderly squeezed the patient’s hands in his turn, he wanted to calm her down.

—Let’s see, is it all possible? … To say such things, you have to be really sure… And then, it takes too long! Come on, it’s more of a disease that doctors don’t understand.

“A disease,” she continued with a sneer, “a disease that he stuck in my skin, yes! … For the doctors, you are right: there have come two who have not understood anything, and which are not only agreed. I don’t want one of these birds to set foot here again… Do you hear, he stuck this in the salt. Since I swear to you that I saw it! It’s for my thousand francs, the thousand francs that papa left me. He tells himself that when he destroys me, he will find them well.

—That, I challenge him: they are in a place where no one will discover them, never, ever! … I can go away, I am easy, no one will ever have them, my thousand francs!

“But Aunt Phasie, I, in your place, would send for the gendarmes, if I was that sure.”

She made a gesture of repugnance.

—Oh! no, not the gendarmes… case; it’s between him and me. I know he wants to eat me, and I don’t want him to eat me, of course. So, isn’t it? I just have to defend myself, not to be as stupid as I was, with his salt… Huh? who would believe it? a runt like that, a piece of a man who would put in his pocket, that would end up overcoming a fat woman like me, if we let him do it, with his rat teeth!

A little shiver had seized her. She breathed heavily before finishing.

—No matter, it won’t be for this time. I’m better, I’ll be on my feet within two weeks… And, this time, he’ll have to be very clever to brush me off. Ah! yes I am curious to see that. If he finds a way to give me back his drugs, it is because, decidedly, he is the stronger, and then, too bad! I’ll slam… That we do not interfere!

Jacques thought that illness haunted his brain with these dark imaginations; and, to distract her, he tried to joke when she began to tremble under the blanket.

“Here he is,” she whispered. I can feel it when he approaches.

Indeed, a few seconds later, Misard entered. She had become livid, a prey to this involuntary terror of the colossi before the insect which gnaws at them; because, in her obstinacy to defend herself alone, she was terrified of him. growing, which she did not admit. Misard, moreover, who from the door had enveloped them, herself and the mechanic, with a lively glance, did not even seem to have seen them afterwards, side by side; and, with dull eyes, thin mouth, with the gentle air of a puny man, he was already confused in attentions before Severine.

—I thought Madame might want to take the opportunity to take a look at her property. So, I escaped for a moment… If the lady wants me to go with her.

And, as the young woman refused again, he continued in a sad voice:

—Madame may have been surprised, because of the fruits… They were all crooked, and it was really not worth the packaging… With that, there came a gale that did a lot of harm… Ah! it is sad that madam cannot sell! A gentleman presented himself who asked for repairs… well, I am at

Madame’s disposal, and Madame can count on me replacing her here like another herself.

Then he insisted on serving her bread and pears, pears from his own garden, which were not crooked. She accepted.

As they walked through the kitchen, Misard had told the travelers that the clearance work was working, but that there was still four or five hours left. Noon had struck, and it was new lamentation, for he was starting to be very hungry. Flore, in fact, declared that she would not have bread for everyone. She had plenty of wine, she had come up from the cellar with ten liters, which she had just lined up on the table. But the glasses were also missing: we had to drink in groups, the English lady with her two daughters, the old gentleman with his young wife. The latter, moreover, found in the young man from Havre a zealous, inventive servant, who watched over his well-being. He disappeared, returned with apples and a loaf, discovered at the bottom of the pyre. Flore got angry, said it was bread for her sick mother. But, already, he was cutting it, distributed it to the ladies, starting with the young woman, who smiled at him, flattered. Her husband was not mad, no longer even bothered with her, in the process of exalting New York commercial customs with the American. Never had young Englishwomen eat apples so heartily. Their mother, very weary, was half asleep. There were two seated ladies on the ground in front of the hearth, overcome by the waiting. Men who had gone out to smoke in front of the house to kill for a quarter of an hour came home frozen, shivering. Little by little, the discomfort grew, the hunger unsatisfied, fatigue doubled by embarrassment and impatience. It turned to the castaway camp, to the desolation of a band of civilized people thrown by a sea blow into a desert island.

And, as Misard’s comings and goings left the door open, Aunt Phasie, from her sickbed, watched. It was therefore there this world, she also saw passing in a stroke of lightning, for a year soon she dragged her mattress in his chair. She could rarely even go on the platform any more, she lived her days and her nights, alone, nailed there, her eyes on the window, with no other company than these trains which went so fast. She had always complained about this land of wolves, where one never had a visit; and here is a real troop disembarked from the unknown. To think that, in there, among these people in a hurry to run about their business, not one suspected

the thing, the filth that had been put in his salt! She had it in her heart, that invention, she wondered if it was God allowed to have so much sly rascality, without anyone noticing. Finally, however, there were enough crowds in front of their homes, thousands and thousands of people; but all that was galloping, not one who would have imagined that, in this small low house, one killed at their ease, without making noise. And Aunt Phasie looked at them one after the other, these people who had fallen from the moon, thinking that when you're so busy, it was no wonder to walk in dirty things and not know anything about them.

—Are you going back there? Misard asked Jacques.

"Yes, yes," replied the latter, "I follow you."

Misard left, closing the door. And Phasie, holding the young man by the hand, whispered in his ear again:

—If I snap, you'll see his face when he doesn't find the loot… That's what amuses me, when I think about it. I will go away happy all the same.

"And then, Aunt Phasie, will everyone be lost?" So you won't leave it to your daughter?

—To Flore! to take it from him! Ah well, no! … Not even to you, my big boy, because you are too stupid too: he would have something of it… To no one, to the land where I will join him! She was exhausted, and Jacques put her back to bed, calmed her down, kissing her, promising her to come and see her again soon. Then, as she seemed to doze off, he passed behind Séverine, still seated near the stove; he raised a finger, smiling, to urge her to be careful; and, with a lovely silent movement, she threw back her head, offering her lips, and he leaned down, pressed her mouth to his, in a deep and discreet kiss. Their eyes were closed, they were drinking their breath. But, when they reopened them, distraught, Flore, who had opened the door, was there, standing in front of them, looking at them.

—Madame no longer needs bread? she asked in a hoarse voice.

Severine, confused, very bored, stammered vague words:-

No, no, thank you.

For a moment, Jacques fixed Flore's eyes of flame. He hesitated, his lips trembled, as if he wanted to speak; then, with a great furious gesture that threatened her, he preferred to leave. Behind him the door banged hard.

Flore remained standing, with her tall figure of a virgin warrior, wearing her heavy helmet of blond hair. His anguish, every Friday, to see this lady

on the train he was driving, had therefore not deceived her. The certainty that she searched since she had held them there, together, she had it finally, absolute. The man she loved would never love her: it was this thin woman, this nothing at all, that he had chosen. And her regret at having refused, the night he had brutally tried to take her, was still irritated, so painful, that she would have sobbed; for, in his simple reasoning, it would be her he would kiss now, if she had given herself to him before the other. Where to find him alone, at this hour, to throw himself at his neck, crying: “Take me, I was stupid, because I did not know!” But, in her helplessness, a rage rose in her against the creature frail who was there, embarrassed, stammering. With a hug of her hard wrestling arms, she could suffocate him and a little bird. Why then did she not dare? She swore revenge, however, knowing things about this rival, which would have put her in prison, she who was left free, like all the pigs sold to old, powerful and rich. And, tortured with jealousy, swollen with anger, she began to remove the rest of the bread and the pears, with the great gestures of a beautiful wild girl.

—Since Madame doesn’t want it any more, I’ll give it to the others.

Three o’clock struck, then four. Time dragged on, disproportionate, in a crush of growing weariness and irritation. Here is the night returning, livid over the vast white countryside; and, from ten minutes to ten minutes, the men who went out to look at the work from afar, returned to say that the machine still did not seem to be clear. The two little Englishwomen themselves came to cry in annoyance. In a corner, the pretty dark-haired woman had fallen asleep against the shoulder of the young man from Le Havre, which the old husband did not even see, in the midst of the general abandonment, taking away the conveniences. The room was getting colder, we were shivering without even thinking of putting wood back on the fire, so that the American left, finding that he would be better off lying on the bench of a car. It was now the idea, everyone’s regret: we should have stayed there, we wouldn’t at least have devoured each other, in the dark about what was going on. The English lady, who was also speaking, had to be restrained from returning to her compartment and lying down there. When a candle had been planted on a corner of the table to light up the world, at the back of this black kitchen, the discouragement was immense, everything sank into a gloomy despair.

There, however, the clearing was completed; and, while the team of soldiers, who had cleared the machine, swept the lane in front of her, the mechanic and the driver had just returned to their posts.

Jacques, seeing that the snow had finally ceased, regained confidence. The switchman Ozil had told him that beyond the tunnel, on the Malaunay side, the quantities that had fallen were much less considerable. Again he questioned him:

“Did you come on foot through the tunnel, were you able to enter and leave it freely?”

—When I tell you! You will pass, I answer for it.

Cabuche, who had worked with the ardor of a good giant, was already drawing back, with his timid and fierce air, which his latest quarrels with the law had only increased; and Jacques had to call him.

—Say, comrade, pass us the shovels which are ours, there, against the embankment. If necessary, we would find them.

And, when the quarryman had done him this last service, he gave him a vigorous handshake, to show him that he esteemed him in spite of everything, having seen him at work.

—You are a good man, you!

This mark of friendship moved Cabuche in an extraordinary way.

“Thank you,” he said simply, choking back tears.

Misard, who had returned with him, after having charged him before the examining magistrate, nodded, his lips pursed with a thin smile. For a long time, he had stopped working, his hands in his pockets, yellow, seeming to be waiting, to see, under the wheels, if he would not pick up lost objects.

Finally, the chief driver had just decided with Jacques that we could try to set off again, when Pecqueux, back down on the track, called the mechanic.

—See then. There is a cylinder that received a slap.

Jacques approached, bent down in his turn. Already, he had noticed, by examining the Lison carefully, that she was injured there. While clearing, we noticed that oak sleepers, left along the embankment by road menders, had slipped, barring the rails, under the action of snow and wind; and even the stop, in part, had to come from this obstacle, because the machine had come up against the sleepers. You could see the scratch on the cylinder box, in which the piston appeared to be slightly bent. But that was all the

apparent harm; which had reassured the mechanic at first. Perhaps there were serious internal disorders, nothing is more delicate than the complicated mechanism of the drawers, where the heart beats, the living soul. He climbed back up, hissed, opened the regulator, to feel Lison's joints. It took a long time to move, like a person bruised by a fall, who no longer finds his limbs. Finally, with a painful breath, she started off, made a few turns of the wheel, still dizzy, heavy. She would be fine could walk, would make the trip. Only he nodded, for he, who knew her inside out, had just felt her singular under his hand, changed, aged, touched somewhere with a death blow. It was in this snow that she must have taken it, a blow to the heart, a deathly cold, as well as these young women, solidly built, who go from the chest, to have returned one evening of ball, in an icy rain.

Jacques whistled again, after Pecqueux had opened the trap. The two drivers were at their posts. Misard, Ozil and Cabuche climbed onto the footboard of the lead van. And, slowly, the train came out of the trench, between the soldiers armed with their shovels, which had lined up to the right and to the left, along the embankment. Then he stopped in front of the gatekeeper's house to pick up the travelers.

Flore was there, outside. Ozil and Cabuche joined her, stood near her; while Misard hastened now, greeted the ladies and gentlemen who left his house, picked up white coins. Finally, it was therefore deliverance! But we had waited too long, everyone was shivering with cold, hunger and exhaustion. The English lady took her two half-asleep daughters, the young man from Le Havre climbed into the same compartment as the pretty brunette woman, very languid, placing himself at the disposal of the husband. And one would have said, in the mess of trampled snow, the embarkation of a routed troop, jostling each other, abandoning themselves, having lost even the instinct of cleanliness. For a moment, at the bedroom window, behind the glass, appeared Aunt Phasie, whom curiosity had thrown down from her mattress, and who had dragged herself to see. Her big, sickly cave eyes gazed at this unknown crowd, these passers-by of the moving world, whom she would never see again, brought by the storm and carried away by it.

But Séverine was the last to leave. She turned her head, she smiled at Jacques, who bent down to follow her to her car. And Flore, who was waiting for them, turned pale still at this quiet exchange of their tenderness.

With a sudden movement, she approached Ozil, whom she had pushed back until then, as if, now, in her hatred, she felt the need for a man.

The chief driver gave the signal, the Lison answered with a plaintive whistle, and Jacques, this time, started to stop only in Rouen. It was six o’clock, night was finishing falling from the black sky over the white countryside; but a pale reflection of dreadful melancholy remained low to the ground, lighting up the desolation of this devastated country. And, there, in that shady light, the house of the Croix-de-Maufras stood sideways, more dilapidated and all black in the middle of the snow, with its sign: “For sale”, nailed to its closed facade.

VIII

In Paris, the train did not enter the station until ten forty in the evening. There had been a twenty-minute stop in Rouen, to give the travelers time to dine; and Séverine had hastened to send a dispatch to her husband, warning him that she would not return to Havre until the express the following evening. A whole night of being with Jacques, the first they would spend together, in a closed room, free of themselves, without fear of being disturbed there!

As we had just left Mantes, Pecqueux had had an idea. His wife, Mother Victoire, had been in the hospital for eight days with a severe sprain of the foot following a fall; and, having another bed for him in town to sleep in, as he said with a sneer, he had found to offer Madame Roubaud their room: she would be much better there than in a neighboring hotel, she could stay there until ’the next evening, like at home. Immediately, Jacques realized the practical side of the arrangement, especially since he did not know where to lead the young woman. And, under the marchioness, among the stream of travelers finally disembarking, when she approached the machine, he advised her to accept, had delivered. But she hesitated, refused, embarrassed by the brisk smile of the latter, who surely knew.

—No, no, I have a cousin. She’ll put a mattress on the floor for me.

“Accept, then,” said Pecqueux at last, with his good-natured honeymooner air. The bed is soft, come on! and it is tall, we would sleep four there!

Jacques looked at her so urgently that she took the key. He leaned over, whispered to her in a very low voice:-

Wait for me.

Séverine had only to go up one end of the rue d’Amsterdam and turn into the dead end; but the snow was so slippery that she had to walk very carefully. She had the chance to Finding the house still open, she went up the stairs, without even being seen by the concierge, stuck in a game of dominoes with a neighbor; and, on the fourth, she opened the door, closed it

so gently that no neighbor, for sure, could suspect her there. However, while passing on the landing of the third, she had very distinctly heard laughter, songs, at the Dauvergne's: doubtless one of the small receptions of the two sisters, who thus made music with friends, once a week. And now that Séverine had closed the door, in the heavy darkness of the room, she could still perceive, through the floor, the lively gaiety of all. this youth. For a moment the darkness seemed complete; and she started when the cuckoo, in the middle of the darkness, began to strike eleven o'clock, with deep blasts, in a voice she recognized. Then, her eyes got used to it, the two windows cut into two pale squares, lighting the ceiling with the reflection of snow. She was already orientating herself, looking on the sideboard for matches, in a corner where she remembered having seen them. But she had more difficulty finding a candle; finally, she discovered one end of it, at the bottom of a drawer; and, having lighted it, the room brightened up, she glanced at it quickly and uneasily, as if to see if she was really alone. She recognized everything, the round table where she had lunched with her husband, the bed draped in red cotton, on the edge of which he had knocked her down with a punch. It was there, nothing had been changed in the room for ten months since she had been there.

Slowly, Séverine took off her hat. But, as she was also about to take off her coat, she shivered. We were freezing in this room. Near the stove, in a small box, there was some charcoal and some wood. Immediately, without undressing any further, the idea occurred to him to light a fire; and it amused her, was a distraction from the uneasiness she had first felt. This household she was doing would both be very warm, returned her to the tender joy of their escapade: for so long, without hope of ever obtaining it, they had dreamed of such a night! When the stove roared, she contrived to make other preparations, arranged the chairs as she liked, searched for white sheets and completely made the bed again, which gave her a real pain, for it was indeed very wide. His annoyance was not finding anything to eat or drink in the buffet: no doubt, for three days that he had been the master, Pecqueux had swept up to the crumbs on the boards. It was like the light, there was only this end of a candle; but, when we go to bed, we don't need to see clearly. And, being very hot now, lively, she stopped in the middle of the room, giving a peek, to make sure nothing was missing.

Then, as she was astonished that Jacques was not there yet, a whistle drew her to one of the windows. It was the eleven-twenty train, a direct one for Le Havre, which was leaving. Below, the vast field, the trench which goes from the station to the Batignolles tunnel, was no more than a sheet of snow, where one could only make out the fan of the rails, with black branches. The machines, the carriages in the garages formed white piles, as if asleep under ermine. And, between the windows Immaculate by the large marquees and the frameworks of the Pont de l'Europe, lined with guipures, the houses in the Rue de Rome, opposite, could be seen in spite of the night, dirty, muddled with yellow, in the midst of all this white. The direct from Le Havre appeared, creeping and dark, with its forward lantern, which pierced the darkness with a living flame; and she watched him disappear under the bridge, while the three rear lights bloodied the snow. When she turned back to the bedroom, a short shudder came over her: was she really alone? he had seemed to feel a fiery breath warming his neck, the brush of a brutal gesture had just passed over his flesh, through his clothing. His widened eyes circled the room again. No, nobody.

What was Jacques playing at, then, to linger like this? Ten more minutes passed. A light scratching, the sound of fingernails scratching wood, worried him. Then, she understood, she ran to open it. It was him, with a bottle of malaga and a cake.

All shaken with laughter, with a passionate movement of caress, she hung around his neck.

—Oh! are you cute! You thought about it!

But he hastily silenced her.

—Shhh! shhh!

So she lowered her voice, believing he was being chased by the janitor. No, he had been lucky, as it was about to ring, to see the door open for a lady and her daughter, who no doubt came from the Dauvergne; and he had been able to go up without anyone suspecting it. Only there, on the landing, he had just seen a half-open door, the newspaper seller who was finishing a little soaping in a basin.

—Don't make noise, will you? Let's talk softly.

She responded by hugging him in a passionate embrace and covering his face with mute kisses. It cheered him up, to play mystery, not to whisper but very low.

—Yes, yes, you will see: we will not be heard more than two little mice.

And she set the table with all sorts of precautions, two plates, two glasses, two knives, stopping with a desire to burst out laughing, as soon as an object rang, put down too quickly.

He, who was watching her, amused too, continued in a

low voice: “I thought you would be hungry.”

—But I’m dying! We had such a bad dinner in Rouen!

“Say then, if I go back downstairs to get a chicken?”

—Ah! no, so that you can’t go back up again! … No, no, that’s enough of the cake.

Immediately, they sat down side by side, almost on the same chair, and the cake was shared, eaten with a kidding of lovers. She complained of being thirsty, she drank two glasses of malaga, which finished making the blood rush to his cheeks. The stove reddened behind their backs, they felt the fiery shudder. But, as he was kissing her too loudly on the back of her neck, she in turn stopped him.

—Shhh! shhh!

She motioned for him to listen; and, in the silence, they heard a dull movement coming up again from the Dauvergne’s, punctuated by the sound of music: these young ladies had just organized a dance. Beside, the newspaper seller was throwing the soapy water from her basin into the lead of the landing. She closed her door, the dance downstairs ceased for a moment, there was no longer, outside, under the window, in the snow, only a dull rolling, the departure of a train, which seemed to cry with weak whistles.

“A train from Auteuil,” he whispered. Ten minutes to midnight.

Then, in a caressing voice, light as a breath:-

At bedtime, darling, will you?

She did not answer, taken in the past in her happy fever, reliving in spite of herself the hours she had lived there, with her husband. Was it not the breakfast of yesteryear which continued with this cake, eaten on the same table, in the midst of the same noises? A growing excitement emanated from things, memories overflowed her, never before had she felt such a stinging need to tell her lover everything, to indulge herself. all. She had it as a physical desire, which she no longer distinguished from her sensual desire; and it seemed to her that she would belong to him more, that she

would exhaust the joy of being his, if she confessed herself in his ear, in a kiss. The facts were evoked, her husband was there, she turned her head, imagining that she had just seen his short hairy hand pass over her shoulder, to take the knife.

—Do you want? honey, go to bed! repeated Jacques.

She shivered, feeling the young man's lips crushing hers, as if, once again, he wanted to seal the confession. And, silent, she got up, undressed quickly, slipped under the blanket, without even raising her skirts, dragging on the floor. He did not put anything away either: the table was left with the stampede of the table, while the end of the candle was burning, the flame already flickering. And when, in his turn, undressed, he lay down, it was a sudden embrace, a carried away possession, which choked them both, out of breath. In the dead air of the room, as the music continued downstairs, there was not a scream, not a sound, just a great frantic thrill, a deep spasm to the point of passing out.

Jacques already no longer recognized Séverine as the wife of first dates, so sweet, so passive, with the clarity of her blue eyes. She seemed to be passionate about herself every day, under the dark helmet of her black hair; and he had felt her awaken little by little, in his arms, from that long cold virginity, from which neither the senile practices of Grandmorin, nor the conjugal brutality of Roubaud had been able to draw her. The creature of love, formerly simply docile, loved at this hour, and gave herself without reserve, and kept a burning gratitude from pleasure. She had come to a violent passion, to adoration for this man who had revealed his senses to her. It was this great happiness, to finally hold it to her, freely, to keep him against his throat, bound with both arms, which had just gritted his teeth, not to let out a sigh.

When they opened their eyes again, he was the first to be surprised.

—Here! the candle has gone out.

She made a slight movement, as if to say that she didn't care. Then, with a stifled laugh:-

I was good, eh?

—Oh! yes, no one heard… Two real little mice!

When they had gone back to bed, she immediately picked him up in her arms, curled up against him, buried her nose in his neck. And, sighing with pleasure:-

My God! that we are good!

They did not speak any more. The room was dark, we could make out barely the pale squares of the two windows; and there was only a ray of the stove on the ceiling, a round, bloody stain. They were both looking at her, eyes wide open. The sounds of music had ceased, doors were banging, the whole house fell into the heavy peace of sleep. Below, the arriving train from Caen shook the turntables, their muffled shocks barely rising, as if very distant.

But, keeping Jacques like this, Severine soon burned again. And, with desire, the need for a confession awoke in her. For so long weeks he had tormented her! The round spot on the ceiling widened, seemed to extend like a blood stain. His eyes were hallucinating watching her, things around the bed resumed voices, told the story out loud. She felt the words rise to her lips, with the nervous wave that lifted her flesh. How good it would be to hide nothing more, to blend into him entirely!

“You don’t know, darling…

Jacques, who didn’t take his eyes off the bleeding spot either, heard what she was about to say.” Against him, in that delicate body tied to his body, he had just followed the rising tide of this obscure, enormous thing, of which they both thought, without ever talking about it. Until then he had done shut up, fearing the precursor shiver of his old illness, trembling that it would change their existence, to cause blood between them. But this time he had no strength even to bend his head and close her mouth with a kiss, such a delicious languor had invaded him, in this warm bed, with the flexible arms of this woman. He thought it was done, that she would say everything. So he was relieved of his anxious wait, when she seemed to be troubled, hesitate, then step back and say:

“You don’t know, darling, my husband suspects that I’m sleeping with you.”

At the last second, without her having wanted to, it was the memory of the night before, in Le Havre, that came out of her mind. lips, instead of confession.

—Oh! you think? he whispered incredulously. He looks so sweet. He held out his hand to me again this morning.

—I assure you he knows everything. At this moment, he must tell himself that we are like that, one inside the other, to love each other! I have

proof.

She fell silent, hugged him more tightly, in an embrace where the happiness of possession was sharpened by resentment. Then, after a quivering reverie:

—Oh! I hate him, I hate him!

Jacques was surprised. He didn’t want Roubaud at all. He found him very accommodating.

—Here! why is that? he asked. It doesn’t bother us much.

She did not answer, she repeated:

—I hate him… Now, just to feel him next to me, it’s torture. Ah! if I could, how I would save myself, how I would stay with you!

In his turn, touched by this surge of ardent tenderness, he brought her back further, had her against his flesh, from his feet to his shoulder, all his. But, again, huddled in this way, almost without detaching the lips stuck to her neck, she said softly:-

You don’t know, darling…

It was the confession that came back, fatal, inevitable. And, this time, he was clearly aware of it, nothing in the world would delay him, for he was rising in her from the desperate desire to be taken back and possessed. You could no longer hear a breath in the house, the newspaper seller herself must have been sleeping soundly. Outside, Paris under the snow did not roll like a car, buried, draped in silence; and the last train from Le Havre, which had left at twenty past twelve, seemed to have carried the last life of the station. The stove was no longer roaring, the fire was burning into embers, further brightening the red stain on the ceiling, rounded up there like an eye of fear. It was so hot that a heavy, suffocating mist seemed to weigh on the bed, where the two, swooning, mingled their limbs.

—Honey, it’s that you don’t know…

Then he spoke too, irresistibly.

—Yes, yes, I know.

—No, you may suspect, but you cannot know.

—I know he did this for the inheritance.

She gave a movement, a nervous, involuntary little laugh.

—Ah! yes, the inheritance!

And very low, so low that a night insect grazing the windows would have buzzed higher, she told her childhood with President Grandmorin,

wanted to lie, not to confess her relationship with him, then gave in to the need to frankness, found relief, almost pleasure, in saying it all. Its light murmur, from then on, flowed, inexhaustible.

—Imagine, it was here, in this room, last February, you remember, at the time of his affair with the sub-prefect… We had breakfast, very nicely, as we have just had supper, there, on this table. Of course, he didn't know anything, I hadn't gone to tell him the story… And now, about a ring, an old gift, about nothing, I don't know how it came about. that he understood everything… ah! My darling, no, no, you can't imagine how he treated me!

She was shivering, he could feel her little hands which had clenched on her bare skin.

—With a punch, he hit me on the ground… And then he dragged me by the hair… And then he raised his heel to my face, as if he wanted to. 'crush… No! you see, so much that I will live, I will remember that… More beatings, my God! But if I repeated all the questions he asked me, what he forced me to tell him! You see, I am frank, since I confess things to you, when nothing, is not it? don't make me tell you. Well! I will never dare to give you even a simple idea of the dirty questions to which I had to answer, because he would have knocked me out, that's for sure… No doubt, he loved me, he must have had a big grief on learning all this; and I grant that I would have acted more honestly, if I had warned him before the wedding. Only you have to understand. It was old, it was forgotten. There is no than a real savage to drive himself mad with jealousy… Come on, you, my darling, are you not going to love me anymore, because you know that now?

Jacques had not moved, inert, reflecting, between those woman's arms which tightened around her neck, her back, like the knots of snakes. He was very surprised, the suspicion of such a story never having occurred to him. How complicated everything was, when the will would have been enough to explain things so well! Besides, he liked it better, the certainty that the household had not killed for money relieved him of a contempt, of which he was sometimes confused, even under Séverine's kisses.

—I don't love you anymore, why? … I don't care about your past. These are matters that do not concern me… You are Roubaud's wife, you could well have been someone else's.

There was a silence. The two were hugging and choking, and he could feel her round, swollen, hard throat in his side.

—Ah! you were the old man’s mistress. All the same, it’s funny.

But she dragged herself alongside him, to his mouth, stammering in a kiss:-

There is only you I love, I have never loved anyone but you… Oh! the others, if you only knew! With them, you see, I didn’t just learn what it could be; while you, my darling, you make me so happy!

She inflamed him with her caresses, offering herself, wanting him, taking him back with her lost hands. And, in order not to give in immediately, he who was on fire like her, he had to hold her back, with both arms.

—No, no, wait, later… And, then, this old man?

Very low, in a shock of her whole being, she confessed:-

Yes, we killed him.

The thrill of desire was lost in that other thrill of death returning to her. It was, as at the bottom of all pleasure, an agony which began again. For a moment, she was suffocated by a sluggish sensation of dizziness. Then, the nose again in the neck of her lover, with the same light breath:

—He had me write to the president to leave by express, at the same time as us, and to only show up in Rouen… I was trembling in my corner, bewildered thinking of the misfortune in which we let’s go. And there was, in front of me, a woman in black who said nothing and who scared me a lot. I didn’t even see her, I imagined that she read clearly in our skulls, that she knew very well what we wanted to do… That’s how the two hours went, from Paris to Rouen. I didn’t say a word, I didn’t stir, closing my eyes, to pretend I was asleep. at my side, I felt him, also motionless, and what terrified me, it terrible things that he was rolling in his head, without being able to guess exactly what he had resolved to do… Ah! what a journey, with this swirling stream of thoughts, amid the whistles, the bumps and the rumble of the wheels!

Jacques, who had his mouth in the thick fragrant fleece of her hair, kissed her at regular intervals, long unconscious kisses.

“But since you weren’t in the same compartment, how did you manage to kill him?”

—Wait, you'll understand… It was my husband's plan. It is true that, if he succeeded, it was luck that wanted him… In Rouen, there was a ten-minute break. We are got out, he forced me to walk to the president's coupé, with the air of people stretching their legs. And there he affected the surprise, seeing him at the door, as if he had ignored that he was on the train. On the quay, we jostled, a flood of people stormed the second classes, because of a party which took place in Le Havre, the next day. When we started to close the doors, it was the president himself who asked us to go upstairs with him. I stammered, I spoke of our suitcase; but he cried out, he said that it would certainly not be stolen from us, that we could return to our compartment, to Barentin, since he was going down there. A moment, my husband, worried, seemed to want to run to look for her. At that moment, the driver was whistling, and he made up his mind, pushed me into the coupe, got in, closed the door and the mirror. How did we not see us? this is what I cannot yet explain to myself. A lot of people were running, the employees were losing their minds, finally there was not a witness who saw clearly. And the train slowly left the station.

She was silent for a few seconds, reliving the scene. Without her realizing it, in the abandonment of her limbs, a tic stirred her left thigh, rubbing it in a rhythmic movement against a knee of the young man.

—Ah! the first moment, in this coupe, when I ground flee! I was almost dizzy, I only thought of our suitcase first: how to get it back? and wasn't she going to sell us if we left her there? It all seemed stupid, impossible to me, a nightmare murder imagined by a child that you would have to be mad to carry out. The next day, we would be arrested, convinced. So I tried to reassure myself, telling myself that my husband would back down, that it would not, could not be. But no, just seeing him chatting with the President, I understood that his resolution remained steadfast and fierce. Yet he was very calm, he even spoke cheerfully, in his usual manner; and it had to be in his clear gaze alone, fixed at times on me, that I could read the obstinacy of his will. He would kill him, another kilometer away, maybe two, to the exact point he had fixed, and that I did not know: it was certain, it burst even in the quiet glances with which he enveloped the other., the one who, later, would no longer be. I said nothing, I had a great inner tremor that I tried to hide, pretending to smile, as soon as anyone looked at me. Why, then, did I not even think of preventing it all? It was only later, when I

wanted to understand, that I was surprised that I hadn't started shouting through the door, or not having pulled the alarm button. At that moment, I was paralyzed, I felt radically helpless. No doubt my husband seemed to me within his rights; and, since I'm telling you everything, darling, I must also confess this: I was in spite of myself, with all my being, with him against the other, because the two had had me, it not? and that he was young, while the other, oh! the caresses of the other… Finally, do we know? We do things we never thought we could do. When I think I wouldn't dare to bleed a chicken! Ah! this feeling of stormy night, ah! that dreadful black screaming deep inside me!

And this frail creature, so slender in his arms, Jacques now found her impenetrable, bottomless, of that dark depth of which she spoke. No matter how much he tied her to him more tightly, he didn't enter her. A fever seized him, at this story of the murder, stammered in their embrace.

—Tell me, did you help him kill the old man?

"I was in a corner," she continued without answering. My husband separated me from the president, who occupied the other corner. They were chatting together about the upcoming elections… At times, I saw my husband lean over, glance outside, to make sure where we were, as if taken with impatience… Each times, I followed his gaze, I also realized the distance traveled. The night was pale, the black masses of trees marched furiously. And always that rumble of the wheels that I have never heard like, a dreadful tumult of enraged and moaning voices, mournful complaints of beasts howling at death! At full speed, the train was running… Suddenly, there was light, a reverberating echo of the train between the buildings of a station. We were at Maromme, already two and a half leagues from Rouen. Again Malaunay, and then Barentin. Where was the thing going to be done? Should we wait until the last minute? I was no longer aware of time or distances, I I was abandoning myself, like the falling stone, to this deafening fall through the shadows, when, crossing Malaunay, all of a sudden I understood: the thing would be done in the tunnel, a kilometer away… I turned to my husband, our eyes met: yes, in the tunnel, two more minutes… the train was running, the Dieppe branch was passed, I saw the switchman at his post. There are hills there, where I thought I distinctly saw men, arms raised, who were charging us insults. Then the machine whistled for a long time: it was the entrance to the tunnel… And, when the train

rushed into it, oh! what an impact under this low vault! you know, those sounds of stirred iron, like hammers flying on the anvil, and that I, at that second of panic, I transformed into rolling thunder.

She was shivering, she interrupted herself to say in a changed voice, almost laughing:

“Is it stupid, eh?” honey, to still be cold in the bones. However, I was very warm there with you, and I am so happy! … And then, you know, there is nothing at all to fear: the case is closed, besides the big ones Government hats are even less eager than we are to clarify this… Oh! I understood, I am calm.

Then she added, quite laughing:

—For example, you, you can boast of having scared us! … And tell me, it always intrigued me: exactly, what had you seen?

“But what I said to the judge, nothing more: a man who was slaughtering another… You were so funny to me that I ended up doubting myself.” For a moment, I even recognized your husband… It was only later, however, that I was absolutely certain…

She interrupted him cheerfully.

—Yes, in the square, the day I told you no, do you remember? the first time we were alone in Paris… How strange! I told you it wasn’t us, and I knew perfectly well that you meant the opposite. Wasn’t it, it was as if I had told you everything? … Oh! darling, I have thought about it often, and I believe, you see, that it is since that day that I love you.

They had a momentum, a pressure where they seemed to merge. And she went on:

“The train was running under the tunnel. The tunnel is very long.” We’ll stay there for three minutes. I thought we had driven there for an hour… The president was no longer talking, because of the deafening noise of stirred iron. And my husband, at that last moment, must have been fainting because he still wasn’t moving. I could only see, under the light dancing from the lamp, her ears turning purple… Was he going to wait until he was in the open country again? The thing was now so fatal for me, so inevitable, that I had only one desire: not to suffer so much from waiting, to be rid of it. Why didn’t he kill him, since he had to? I would have taken the knife to end it, I was so exasperated with fear and suffering… He looked at me. I probably had that on my face. And all of a sudden he rushed forward, seized

the president by the shoulders, who had turned towards the door. The latter, startled, freed himself with an instinctive jerk, stretched out his arm towards the alarm button, just over his head. He touched it, was picked up by the other and knocked down on the bench with such a thrust that he found himself doubled over there. His mouth, open with amazement and terror, let out confused cries, stifled in the din; while I distinctly heard my husband repeat the word: Pig! pig! pig! in a hissing voice, which became enraged. But the noise died down, the train came out of the tunnel, the pale countryside reappeared, with the black trees passing by… I had stayed in my corner, stiffened, glued to the sheet of the backrest, as far as possible. How long did the struggle last? just a few seconds. And it seemed to me that she never finished, that all the travelers now listened to the cries, that the trees saw us. My husband, who held his knife open, could not hit, kicked back, tripping over the moving floor of the car. He almost fell on his knees, and the train ran, carrying us at full speed, while the machine whistled, as we approached the level crossing of Croix-de-Maufras… It was then that, without I could then remember how it was done, I threw myself on the legs of the struggling man. Yes, I let myself fall like a bundle, crushing his legs with all my weight, so he wouldn't move them anymore. And I didn't see anything, but I felt everything: the shock of the knife in the throat, the long shaking of the body, the death that came in three gasps, with a clock ticking that we broke… Oh! that thrill of agony which I still echo in the limbs!

Jacques, greedy, wanted to interrupt her to question her. But now she couldn't wait to finish.

—No, wait… As I got up, we were passing at full steam in front of the Croix-de-Maufras. I distinctly saw the closed facade of the house, then the gatekeeper's post. Another four kilometers, five minutes at most, before being at Barentin… The body was folded on the bench, the blood flowed in a thick pool. And my husband, standing, dazed, swayed by the jolts of the train, watched, wiping the knife with his handkerchief. It lasted a minute, without either of us doing anything for our salvation… If we kept this body with us, if we stayed there, we would maybe discover everything, at a standstill de Barentin… But he had put the knife back in his pocket, he seemed to be waking up. I saw him searching the body, taking the watch, the money, whatever he found; and, having opened the door, he endeavored

to push him onto the track, without seizing him with both arms, for fear of blood. “Help me then!” push with me. I didn’t even try, I no longer felt my limbs. “For God Sake! will you push well with me!” The head, which came out first, hung down to the step, while the trunk, rolled up into a ball, refused to pass. And the train was running… Finally, under a stronger push, the corpse tipped over, disappeared in the rumble of the wheels. “Ah! the pig, it’s over!” Then he picked up the blanket, threw it too. There was only the two of us, standing, with the pool of blood on the bench, where we did n’t dare sit down… The door was still banging, wide open, and I didn’t understand at first, devastated., distraught, when I saw my husband go down, disappear in his turn. He came back. “Come on, quickly follow me if you don’t want our necks cut off !” I was not moving, he was getting impatient. “Come, then, name of God! our compartment is empty, we are going back.” Empty, our compartment, there was therefore gone? The woman in black, the one who did not speak, who could not be seen, was it quite certain that she had not stayed in a corner? … “Do you want to come, or I will get you on the track? like the other!” He was back up, he was pushing me, brutal, crazy. And I found myself outside on the step, my two hands clinging to the copper rod. He, who got out behind me, had carefully closed the door. “Go on, go on!” But I didn’t dare, carried away in the vertigo of the race, flogged by the wind which blew like a storm. My hair came loose, I thought my stiff fingers were going to drop the rod. “Go then, name of God!” He was still pushing me, I had to walk, letting go one hand after another, pressing myself against the cars, in the midst of the whirlwind of my skirts, the click of which bound my legs. Already, in the distance, after a curve, we could see the lights of Barentin station. The machine began to whistle. “Go then, name of God!” Oh! this hellish noise, this violent trepidation in which I was walking! It seemed to me that a storm had seized me, was rolling me like a straw, to go, over there, to crush me against a wall. Behind my back, the countryside was fleeing, the trees followed me at an enraged gallop, spinning, twisted, each making a brief complaint, in passing. At the end of the wagon, when I had to step over to reach the step of the next wagon and grab the other rod, I stopped, at the end of my courage. I would never have the strength. “Go then, name of God!” He was on top of me, he was pushing me, and I closed my eyes, and I do not know how I continued to advance, by the sheer force of instinct,

like a beast that has planted its claws and does not want to fall. How also have we not been seen? We passed three cars, one of which was second class, was absolutely crowded. I remember the heads lined up in a row, under the light of the lamp; I think I would recognize them if I ever met them: that of a fat man with red sideburns, especially those of two young girls, who lean over laughing. “Go then, name of God! go then, name of God!” And I no longer remember, Barentin’s lights were getting closer, the machine was whistling, my last sensation was to be dragged, carted, carried off by the hair. My husband must have grabbed me, opened the door over my shoulders, threw me into the back of the compartment. Panting, I was half-passed out in a corner when we we have stopped; and I heard him, without making a movement, exchanging a few words with the station master at Barentin. Then, the train started again, he fell on the bench, exhausted himself. Until Le Havre, we did not reopen our mouths… Oh! I hate him, I hate him, you see, for all these abominations he made me suffer! and you, I love you, my darling, you who give me so much happiness!

With Séverine, after the ardent rise of this long story, this cry was like the very blossoming of her need for joy, in the loathing of her memories. But Jacques, whom she had upset and who was burning like her, held her back again.

—No, no, wait… And you were flattened on his legs, and you felt him die?

In him, the stranger awoke, a fierce wave rose from the entrails, invaded his head with a red vision. He was seized with curiosity about the murder.

—And then, the knife, you felt the knife enter?

—Yes, a thud.

—Ah! a thud… Not a heartbreak! are you sure?

—No, no, just a shock.

—And then he had a jerk, eh?

—Yes, three shakes, oh! from one end of her body to the other, so long, that I followed them to her feet.

“Shakes that stiffened him, didn’t they?”

—Yes, the first very strong, the other two weaker.

—And he died, and what did it do to you to feel him die like that, with a stab?

—To me, oh! I do not know.

—You don’t know, why are you lying? Tell me, tell me what it did to you, frankly… Pain?

—No, no, don’t bother!

—Some pleasure?

—Pleasure, ah! no, not fun!

—What, my love? Please tell me everything… If you only knew… Tell me how it feels.

—My God! Can we say that? … It’s dreadful, it takes you off, oh! so far, so far! I lived more in that minute than in all my past life.

Teeth clenched, having only one stutter, Jacques this time had taken it; and Séverine also took it. They possessed themselves, rediscovering love at the bottom of death, in the same painful pleasure of animals which fester themselves during the heat. Their hoarse breath, alone, was heard. On the ceiling, the bleeding reflection had disappeared; and, with the stove off, the room began to freeze, in the great cold outside. Not a voice rose from snow-covered Paris. For a moment, snoring had come from the newsagent’s next door. Then everything was destroyed in the black abyss of the sleeping house.

Jacques, who had kept Séverine in his arms, felt her all which gave way to an invincible sleep, as if struck by lightning. The journey, the prolonged wait at the Misards, that feverish night overwhelmed him. She stammered a childish good evening, she was already asleep, evenly. The cuckoo had just struck three o’clock.

And, for nearly an hour more, Jacques kept it on his left arm, which gradually grew numb. He could not close his eyes, an invisible hand, obstinately, seemed to reopen in the darkness. Now he could no longer distinguish anything from the room, drowned in the night, where everything had sunk, the stove, the furniture, the walls; and he had to turn around to find the two pale squares of the windows, motionless, dreamlike lightness. Despite his crushing fatigue, a prodigious brain activity kept him vibrating, reeling off the same web of ideas over and over. Each time that, by an effort of will, he thought he was slipping into sleep, the same obsession began again, the same images paraded, arousing the same sensations. And what was going on like that, with mechanical regularity, while his staring wide open eyes filled with shadow, was murder, detail by detail. He was always reborn, identical, intrusive, maddening. The knife entered the throat with a

dull shock, the body had three long shakes, life went in a flood of blood warm, a red stream he thought he could feel trickling down his hands. Twenty times, thirty times, the knife entered, the body stirred. It became enormous, suffocated it, overflowed, made the night burst. Oh! to give such a stab, to satisfy this distant desire, to know what one feels, to taste this moment when one lives more than in an entire existence!

As his suffocation increased, Jacques thought that Séverine's weight on his arm was preventing him from sleeping alone. Slowly, he freed himself, put her near him, without waking her. Relieved at first, he breathed more easily, believing that sleep would finally come. But, despite his effort, the invisible fingers reopened his eyelids; and in the dark the murder reappeared in bloody lines, the knife entered, the body stirred. A red rain streaked the darkness, the disproportionate throat wound yawned like a gash made with an ax. So he no longer struggled, remained on his back, a prey to this stubborn vision. He heard in him the tenfold labor of the brain, a rumbling of the whole machine. It came from far away, from his youth. Yet he had believed himself cured, for this desire had been dead for months, with the possession of this woman; and now he had never felt it so intense, under the evocation of this murder, that, just now, pressed against his flesh, bound to his members, she whispered to him. He had moved away, he was avoiding her touching him, burned by the slightest touch of his skin. An unbearable heat rose up his spine, as if the mattress under his loins had turned into a blaze. Of tingling, heat spikes pierced his neck. For a moment he tried to get his hands out of the blanket; but immediately they froze, gave him a shiver. Fear seized him from his hands, and he pulled them in, first joined them on his stomach, ended by sliding them, by crushing them under his buttocks, imprisoning them there, as if he had feared some abomination on their part, an act he would not want and that he would commit anyway.

Each time the cuckoo rang, Jacques counted the blows. Four o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock. He longed for the day, he hoped that the dawn would drive away this nightmare. So now he turned to the windows, watching the panes. But there was still only the vague reflection of the snow there. At a quarter to five, with a delay of only forty minutes, he had heard the direct line coming from Le Havre, which proved that traffic had to be restored. And it was not before past seven that he saw the windows go white, a milky pallor, very slow. Finally, the bedroom lit up, that confused

light in which the furniture seemed to float. The stove reappeared, the cupboard, the sideboard. He could not always close his eyelids, his eyes on the contrary were irritated, in a need to see. Immediately, even before it was clear enough, he had guessed rather than noticed, on the table, the knife he had used that evening to cut the cake. He could only see this knife, a little sharp-tipped knife. As the day grew, all the white light from the two windows now entered only to be reflected in this thin blade. And the terror of his hands made him sink them deeper under his body, for he could feel them were agitated, revolted, stronger than his will. Would they cease to belong to him? Hands that would come to him from another, hands bequeathed by some ancestor, at the time when man, in the woods, strangled animals!

To no longer see the knife, Jacques turned to Séverine. She slept very calmly, with the breath of a child, in her great fatigue. Her heavy black hair, loose, made a dark pillow, flowing down to the shoulders; and, under the chin, between the curls, one could see her throat, of a delicacy of milk, hardly pink. He looked at her as if he didn’t know her. He adored her however, he carried his image everywhere, in a desire for her, which often distressed him, even when he was driving his machine; at this point, that one day he had awakened, like from a dream, as he passed a station at full steam, despite the signals. But the sight of that white throat took him whole, with a sudden, inexorable fascination; and, within him, with still conscious horror, he felt the urgent need to go and fetch the knife from the table, to return to push it up to the handle, in that woman’s flesh. He heard the dull shock of the blade entering, he saw the body jump three times, then death stiffen it, under a red flood. Struggling, wanting to fearful, he lost with each second wave a little of his will, as if overwhelmed by the fixed idea, on that extreme edge where, overcome, one gives in to the surges of instinct. Everything became confused, his revolted hands, victorious in his effort to hide them, untied themselves, escaped. And he understood so well that now he was no longer their master, and that they would suddenly be satisfied, if he continued to look at Séverine, that he put his last strength to throw himself out of bed, rolling by. earth as well as a drunken man. There he picked himself up, almost falling again, his feet entangled among the skirts left on the floor. He was tottering, looking for his clothes lost, with the sole thought of dressing quickly, picking up the knife and going down to kill

another woman in the street. This time his desire tortured him too much, he had to kill one. He couldn’t find his pants, touched them three times, before knowing he was holding them. His shoes to put on gave him infinite pain. Although it was broad daylight now, the room seemed to her to be full of red smoke, a dawn of icy fog in which everything was drowned. He was shivering with fever, and he was finally dressed, he had taken the knife, hiding it in his sleeve, certain to kill one, the first he would meet on the sidewalk, when a rustle of laundry, a a long sigh that came from the bed, stopped him, nailed to the table, turning pale.

It was Séverine waking up.

—What, darling, are you going out already?

He wasn’t responding, he wasn’t looking at her, hoping she would fall asleep again.

—Where are you going, honey?

“Nothing,” he stammered, “a matter of service… Sleep, I’ll come back.”

Then she said confused words, resuming torpor, her eyes already closed.

—Oh! I’m sleepy, I’m sleepy… Come and kiss me, darling.

But he did not move, for he knew that if he turned around, with that knife in his hand, if he only saw her again, so delicate, so pretty, in her nakedness and disorder, it was the will that stiffened him there, near her. In spite of himself, his hand would rise, plant the knife in his neck.

—Honey, come and kiss me…

Her voice died away, she fell asleep again, very soft, with a caressing murmur. And he, distraught, opened the door, fled.

It was eight o’clock when Jacques found himself on the sidewalk in the Rue d’Amsterdam. The snow had not yet been swept away, you could hardly hear the trampling of the few passers-by. Immediately he saw an old woman; but she was turning the corner of the rue de Londres, he did not follow her. Men elbowed him, he went down to the Place du Havre, hugging the knife, the raised point of which disappeared under his sleeve. As a little girl of about fourteen was emerging from a house opposite, he crossed the road; and he only arrived to see her enter a bakery next door. His impatience was such that he did not wait, looking further, continuing to descend. Since he had left the room, with this knife, it was no longer he who acted, but the other, the one he had felt so frequently stir in the depths of his being, this stranger who had come from far away., burned with

hereditary thirst for murder. He had killed once, he wanted to kill again. And things around Jacques were nothing more than a dream, because he saw them through his fixed idea. His everyday life seemed to have been abolished, he walked like a sleepwalker, without memory of the past, without foresight of the future, obsessed with his need. In her fit body, her personality was absent. Two women, who brushed past him, made him hasten his march; and he was catching up with them, when a man stopped them. All three were laughing and chatting. This man disturbing him, he began to follow another woman who passed, puny and black, looking poor under a thin shawl. She was advancing slowly, towards some abhorrent task, hard and poorly paid for, no doubt, for she was in no hurry. desperately sad. Neither did he, now that he had one, in no hurry, waiting to choose the place, to strike her at ease. No doubt she noticed that this boy was following her, and her eyes turned to him, with unspeakable sorrow, astonished that one could want of her. She had already led him to the middle of the Rue du Havre, she turned around twice more, each time preventing him from sticking the knife in her throat, which he took out of his sleeve. She had eyes of misery, so imploring! There, when she got off the sidewalk, he would knock. And suddenly he made a detour, going in pursuit of another woman, reverse. It was for no reason, no will, because it was passing right now, and so it was.

Jacques, behind her, returned to the station. The latter, very lively, walked with a small sonorous step; and she was adorably pretty, twenty years old at the most, plump already, blonde, with beautiful cheerful eyes that laughed at life. She didn’t even notice a man following her; she must have been in a hurry, for she quickly climbed the steps of the courtyard of Le Havre, went up to the great hall, which she almost ran alongside, to rush towards the wickets of the belt line. And, as she asked for a first class ticket for Auteuil, Jacques took some also one, accompanied her through the waiting rooms, on the platform, into the compartment, where he settled next to her. The train immediately left.

—I have time, he thought, I will kill her in a tunnel.

But, in front of them, an old lady, the only person who had come up, had just recognized the young woman.

—How, it’s you! Where are you going so early?

The other burst into a good laugh, with a gesture of comic despair.

—To say that we can do nothing without being met! I hope you won't sell me… It's my husband's birthday tomorrow, and as soon as he was out on his business, I took my race, I'm going to Auteuil to see a horticulturalist, where he saw an orchid he craves… A surprise, you understand.

The old lady nodded with an air of tender benevolence.

—And baby is well?

—The little one, oh! a real charm… You know that I weaned her eight days ago. You have to see her eat her soup… we are all doing too well, it's scandalous.

She laughed out loud, showing her white teeth, between the pure blood of her lips. And Jacques, who had placed himself on his right, knife in hand, hidden behind his thigh, said to himself that he would be very good at striking. He just had to raise his arm and to turn around, to have it in his hand. But, under the Batignolles tunnel, the idea of the hat straps stopped him.

"There is a knot here," he thought, "which will bother me. I want to be sure."

The two women continued to chat happily.

—So I see you're happy.

—Happy, ah! if i could say! It's a dream I'm having… Two years ago, I was nothing at all. You remember, we didn't have much fun with my aunt; and not a penny of dowry… When he came, I trembled, I had come to love him so much. But he was so handsome, so rich… And he's mine, he's my husband, and we both have a baby! I'm telling you it's too much!

By studying the knot of the bridles, Jacques had just noticed that there was underneath, attached to a black velvet, a large gold medallion; and he was calculating everything.

—I will grab him around the neck with my left hand, and I will push aside the medallion, throwing back his head, so that his throat is bare.

The train stopped, started again every minute. Short tunnels had followed one another, at Courcelles, at Neuilly. A second would suffice later.

—You went to the sea this summer? resumed the old lady.

—Yes, in Brittany, six weeks, at the bottom of a lost hole, a paradise. Then, we spent September in Poitou, with my father-in-law, who owns

some large woods there.

—And should you not settle in the South for the winter?

—If, we will be in Cannes around the 15th… The house is rented. A piece of delicious garden, the sea opposite. We have sent someone there who installs everything, to receive us… It is not that we are cautious, neither of us; but that is so good, the sun! … Then, we will be back in March. Next year we will stay in Paris. In two years, when the baby is grown up, we will be traveling. Do I know, me! it's always a party!

She was overflowing with such happiness that, yielding to her need for expansion, she turned to Jacques, to this stranger, to smile at him. In this movement, the knot of the straps moved, the medallion parted, the neck appeared, ruddy, with a slight dimple, which the shadow was gilding.

Jacques' fingers had stiffened on the handle of the knife, as he made an irrevocable resolution.

—It is there, in this place, that I will strike. Yes, later, under the tunnel, before Passy.

But, at the Trocadéro station, an employee got in, who, knowing him, began to talk to him about the service, about a theft of coal of which a mechanic and his driver had just been convinced. And from that moment on everything became confused, he could never, later, set the record straight, exactly. Laughs had continued, a radiance of happiness such that he was as if penetrated and dozing. Perhaps he had gone as far as Auteuil with the two women; only, he did not remember that they had gone down there. He himself had ended up on the banks of the Seine, without explaining how. What he still felt very clear was to have thrown the knife from the top of the bank, which had remained in his sleeve, in his fist. Then he no longer knew, dazed, absent from his being, where the other had also gone, with the knife. He must have walked for hours, through the streets and squares, at random to his body. Of people, houses, marching, very pale. No doubt he was entered somewhere, eat at the end of a room full of people, for he could distinctly see white plates. He also had the lingering impression of a red poster, on a closed shop. And then everything sank into a black abyss, into nothingness, where there was neither time nor space, where he had been lying inert, for centuries perhaps.

When he came to himself, Jacques was in his narrow room in the Rue Cardinet, fallen across his bed, fully dressed. Instinct had brought him

there, like an exhausted dog crawling to its kennel. Besides, he neither remembered having climbed the stairs nor having fallen asleep. He was awakening from a leaden sleep, terrified to suddenly regain possession of himself, as after a deep faint. Maybe he had slept three hours, maybe three days. And, suddenly, his memory came back to him: the night spent with Séverine, the confession of the murder, his departure as a carnivorous beast, in search of blood. He was no longer in him, he found himself there, amazed at the things that had been done outside of his will. Then the memory that the young woman was waiting for him made him stand up with a jump. He looked at his watch, saw that it was already four o'clock; and, his head empty, very calm as after a heavy bloodletting, he hastened to return to the Amsterdam impasse.

Until noon, Séverine had slept soundly. Then, awake, surprised not to see him there again, she had rekindled the stove; and, finally dressed, dying of starvation, she had decided, around two o'clock, to go down to eat in a restaurant in the neighborhood. When Jacques appeared, she had just come back up, after having done some shopping.

—Oh! my darling, how worried I was!

And she had hung herself around his neck, she was looking him closely, in the eyes.

—What happened then?

He, exhausted, his flesh cold, reassured her quietly, without a disturbance.

—But nothing, an annoying chore. When they hold you, they never let go.

So, lowering her voice, she became humble, affectionate.

—Imagine that I imagined… Oh! a nasty idea that caused me pain! … Yes, I said to myself that perhaps, after what I had confessed to you, you were not going to want me anymore… And here I believed you gone not to come back, never, never!

Tears gained her, she burst into tears, hugging him madly in her arms.

—Ah! my darling, if you only knew, how I need people to be nice to me! … Love me, love me, because, you see, there is only your love that can make you forget… Now that I have told you all my misfortunes, haven't I? you must not leave me, oh! I you

Jacques was overcome by this tenderness. An invincible relaxation gradually softened him. He stammered:-

No, no, I love you, don’t be afraid.

And, overwhelmed, he wept too, under the fatality of this abominable disease which had just taken hold of him, from which he would never be cured. It was a shame, a boundless despair.

—Love me, love me too, oh! with all your strength, because I need it as much as you do!

She shivered, wanted to know.

—You have sorrows, you must tell me.

—No, no, not sorrows, things which do not exist, sorrows which make me horribly unhappy, without it being even possible to cause it.

The two embraced each other, confounding the dreadful melancholy of their grief. It was infinite suffering, without possible forgetting, without forgiveness. They wept, and they felt upon them the blind forces of life, made up of struggle and death.

“Come on,” said Jacques, freeing himself, “it’s time to think about leaving. Tonight, you’ll be in Le Havre.”

Séverine, gloomy, her eyes lost, murmured, after a silence:-

Again, if I were free, if my husband was no longer there! … Ah! how quickly we would forget!

He made a violent gesture, he thought out loud.

—Yet we cannot kill him.

Steadfastly, she looked at him, and flinched, astonished to have said this thing, which he had never thought of. Since he wanted to kill, why didn’t he kill him, this troublesome man? And as he finally left her to run to the depot, she took him back in her arms, covered him with kisses.

—Oh! my darling, love me. I will love you stronger, stronger still… Go, we will be happy.

IX

In Le Havre, from the following days, Jacques and Séverine showed themselves to be very cautious, taken with anxiety. Since Roubaud knew everything, was he not going to watch them, surprise them, to take revenge on them, with a bang? They remembered his jealous outbursts of old, his brutalities as an old man team, clapping with closed fists. And, precisely, it seemed to them, seeing him, so heavy, so silent, with his troubled eyes, that he must have been meditating some savage slyness, an ambush, in which he would hold them in his power. Also, during the first month, they saw each other with a thousand precautions, always on the alert.

Roubaud, however, was more and more absent. Perhaps he only disappeared like that to come back unexpectedly and find them in each other's arms. But this fear did not come true. On the contrary, his absences were prolonged to such an extent that he was never there again, escaping as soon as he was free, only returning home. claimed. During the daylight weeks he found a way, at ten o'clock, to eat breakfast in five minutes, then not to reappear before half-past eleven; and in the evening, at five o'clock, when his colleague came down to replace him, he left, often for the whole night. He barely took a few hours of sleep. It was the same for the night weeks, then free from five in the morning, eating and sleeping outside no doubt, in any case not returning until five in the evening. For a long time, in this disarray, he had kept the punctuality of a model employee, always present to the exact minute, so exhausted sometimes, that he did not stand on his legs, but still standing, conscientious in his job. Then, now, holes were happening. Twice already, the other sous-chef, Moulin, must have waited an hour for him; even, one morning, after breakfast, learning that he was not reappearing, he had come to take his place, like a good man, to avoid a reprimand. And all of Roubaud's department was thus beginning to feel the effects of this slow disorganization. During the day, he was no longer the active man, only dispatching or receiving a train after having seen everything through his eyes, recording the smallest facts in his report

to the station master, hard on others and on him- even. At night, he fell asleep in a leaden sleep, in the back of the large armchair in his office. Awake he seemed to be still dozing, pacing back and forth on the quay, hands crossed behind his back, giving orders in a blank voice, which he did not verify the execution of. Everything was working anyway, by force acquired from habit, except for a tampering due to negligence on his part, a passenger train launched on a siding. His colleagues were simply cheering, telling that he was having the wedding.

The truth was that Roubaud now lived on the first floor of the Café du Commerce, in the small, out of the way room, which had gradually become a gambling den. It was said that women went there every night; but we would have really found only one, the mistress of a retired captain, at least forty years old, an avid gamer herself, without sex. The sous-chef only satisfied there the gloomy passion for the game, awakened in him, the day after the murder, by the chance of a game of piquet, then grown and changed into an imperious habit, for the absolute distraction, the annihilation that it gave him. She had possessed him to the point of chasing the desire of women, in this brutal male; henceforth she held him whole, like the sole satisfaction he was content with. It was not that remorse had ever tormented him with the need to forget; but, in the shock of his household, in the midst of his a spoiled existence, he had found the consolation, the giddiness of selfish happiness, which he could taste alone; and everything was sinking now, to the depths of this passion, which was finishing his disorganization. Alcohol wouldn’t have given him lighter, faster, freer hours to this point. He was freed from the very worry of life, he seemed to live with extraordinary intensity, but elsewhere, disinterested, without anything touching him from the troubles with which he had once burst with rage. And he was doing very well, apart from the fatigue of the nights spent; he was even growing fat, with a heavy yellow fat, the lids heavy over his cloudy eyes. When he returned, with the the slowness of his sleepy gestures, he brought to his home, on all things, only a sovereign indifference.

The night Roubaud returned to collect the three hundred gold francs, under the floor, he wanted to pay M. Cauche, the supervisory commissioner, following several successive losses. The latter, an old player, had a fine composure which made him formidable. Moreover, he said he

played only for his pleasure, he was required by his functions of magistrate to keep the appearances of the former soldier, remained a waiter and living in the café, as a quiet regular: which did not prevent him from often shuffle the cards the whole evening, and collect everything other people's money. Rumors had circulated that he was also accused of being so inaccurate in his post that there was talk of forcing him to resign. But things were dragging on, there was so little work, why demand more zeal? And he always contented himself with appearing for a moment on the station platforms, where everyone greeted him.

Three weeks later, Roubaud still owed M. Cauche nearly four hundred francs. He had explained that the inheritance made by his wife made them very comfortable; but he added, laughing, that she kept the keys to the cash register, which excused her slowness in paying her gambling debts. Then, one morning that he was alone, harassed, he lifted the frieze again and took a thousand-franc note from the hiding place. He was trembling in all his limbs, he had not experienced such an emotion on the night of the gold coins: undoubtedly, it was still only a coincidence for him, while the theft began, with this post. A discomfort ruffled his flesh when he thought of this sacred money, which he had promised himself never to touch. Formerly, he swore rather to die of hunger, and yet he touched it, and he could not have said how his scruples had gone, a little every day no doubt, in the slow fermentation of the murder. At the bottom of the hole he thought he had felt dampness, something soft and smelly, which he hated. Quickly, he replaced the frieze, repeating the oath to cut his fist, rather than moving it again. His wife had not seen him, he breathed, relieved, drank a large glass of water to recover. Now his heart was pounding with joy at the thought of his debt paid and all that money he would gamble.

But when the ticket had to be changed, Roubaud's anguish began again. Formerly he was brave, he would have given himself up if he had not committed the stupidity of involving his wife in the affair; while now the mere thought of the gendarmes gave him a cold sweat. did not have the numbers of the missing banknotes, and that, moreover, the trial was sleeping, forever buried in the filing boxes : he was seized with terror as soon as he planned to enter somewhere to ask for change. For five days he kept the note with him; and it was a continual habit, a need to feel it, to move it, not to part with it at night. He built very complicated plans, always

ran up against unforeseen fears. First, he had looked around the station: why wouldn't a colleague, in charge of a recipe, take it from him? Then, this having seemed extremely dangerous to him, he had imagined going to the other end of the Havre, without his uniform cap, to buy anything. Only, wouldn't one be surprised to see him, for a small object, stir such a large sum? And he had stopped using this method, to give the ticket to the tobacco shop in the Cours Napoléon, which he entered every day: wasn't that the simplest? we knew well that he had inherited, the tobacconist could not have any surprises. He walked to the door, felt himself faint and went down to the Vauban basin, to get his courage excited. After half an hour's walk, he returned, without making up his mind yet. And, in the evening, at the Cafe du Commerce, as M. Cauche was there, a sudden bravado made him pull the note from his pocket, begging the patroness to change it for her; but she had no change, she had to send a boy to take it to the tobacco shop. They even joked about the note, which looked brand new, although it was ten years old. The superintendent had taken it, and he was turning it over, saying that this one, for sure, had slept at the bottom of some hole; which threw the retired captain's mistress into an interminable story of fortune hidden, then found, under the marble of a chest of drawers.

Weeks passed, and the money Roubaud had in his hands finished stirring up his passion. It was not that he was playing big game, but a bad luck pursued him, so constant, if black, that the small losses of each day, added together, came to amount to large sums. Towards the end of the month, he found himself penniless, already owing a few louis on his word, sick of not daring to touch a card. Yet he struggled, almost went to bed. The idea of the nine bills sleeping there, under the parquet floor of the dining room, turned into an obsession with him every minute: he saw them through the wood, he felt them warm his soles. To think that, if he had wanted, he would have taken one more! But, it was sworn this time, he would rather have put his hand in the fire than to search again. And, one evening, as Séverine had fallen asleep like a hour, he lifted the frieze, yielding with rage, overwhelmed with such sadness that his eyes filled with tears. What is the use of resisting like this? it would only be unnecessary suffering, for he understood that he would now take them to the last, one by one.

The next morning, Séverine noticed, by chance, a very fresh scratch on one edge of the frieze. She bent down, noticed the traces of a weighing.

Obviously, her husband continued to take money. And she was astonished at the movement of anger which prevailed, for she was not usually interested; not to mention that she too believed herself resolved to starve, rather than touching those bloodstained notes. But were n't they hers as much as they were him? why did he dispose of it, hiding, even avoiding consulting it? Until dinner, she was tormented by the need for certainty, and she in turn would have moved the frieze, to see, if she had not felt a little cold breath in her hair, at the thought of rummaging there all alone… Wasn't the dead going to get up from this hole? This childish fear made the dining room so unpleasant to her that she took her work with her and shut herself up in her room.

Then, in the evening, as they both ate in silence a leftover stew, a new irritation aroused her, seeing him throw involuntary glances in the corner of the floor.

—You took some, eh? she asked sharply.

He looked up, astonished.

—What about?

—Oh! do not be innocent, you understand me well… But listen: I do not want you to take any more, because it is not more for you than for me, and it makes me sick, to know that you touch it.

Usually he avoided quarrels. Common life was no more than the obligatory contact of two beings linked to one another, spending whole days without exchanging a word, coming and going side by side, like strangers now, indifferent and solitary. So he just shrugged his shoulders, refusing any explanation.

But she was very excited, she intended to end the question of this money hidden there, which she had suffered since the day of the crime.

—I want you to answer me… Dare to tell me that you haven't touched it.

—What the hell are you doing?

—I don't care if it turns me around. Even today, I was afraid, I could not stay here. Every time you stir that up, I have three nights of awful dreams… We never talk about it. So be still, don't force me to talk about it.

He gazed at her with his big fixed eyes, he repeated heavily:

—What do you care that I touch it, if I don't force you? to touch it? It's for me, it's up to me.

She made a violent gesture, which she repressed. Then, upset, with a face of pain and disgust:

—Ah! here! I don’t understand you… You were an honest man though. Yes, you would never have taken a penny from anyone… And what you did, it could be forgiven, because you were crazy, as you had made me crazy myself… But this money, ah ! this abominable money, which should no longer exist for you, and which you steal penny by penny, for your pleasure… What is happening then, how can you have come so low?

He listened to her, and, in a minute of lucidity, he was also astonished to have arrived at the flight. The phases of slow demoralization were fading, he could not reconnect with what the murder had decided around him, he could no longer explain to himself how another existence, almost a new being, had begun, with his destroyed household, his wife withdrawn and hostile. Immediately, moreover, the irreparable took him back, he made a gesture, as if to get rid of unwelcome reflections.

“When you’re bothering at home,” he growled, “we’re going to have fun outside. Since you no longer love me…”

—Oh! no, I don’t love you anymore.

He looked at her, punched the table, his face flooded with blood.

—So leave me alone! Am I preventing you from having fun? Do I judge you? … There are many things that an honest man would do in my place, and which I do not. First I should kick you out the door, with my foot behind. Then I might not fly.

She had become quite pale, for she too had often thought that, when a man, a jealous man, is ravaged by an inner evil, to the point of tolerating a lover for his wife, there is the sign of gangrene. moral, with an invasive march, killing other scruples, disorganizing the whole conscience. But she struggled, she refused to be responsible. And, stammering, she cried:

—I forbid you to touch the money.

He had finished eating. Quietly, he folded his napkin, then stood up, saying

mockingly : “If that’s what you want, we’ll share.”

He was already bending down, as if to lift the frieze. She had to rush, put her foot on the floor.

—No no! You know I’d rather die… Don’t open this. No no! not in front of me!

Séverine, that evening, was to meet Jacques, behind the goods station. When she returned after midnight, the scene of the evening was evoked, and she locked herself in her bedroom. Roubaud was on night duty, she did not even afraid that he would come home to bed, as rarely happened. But, the blanket over her chin, the lamp left on the back burner, she could not fall asleep. Why had she refused to share? And she no longer found the revolt of her honesty so fierce at the idea of taking advantage of this money. Had she not accepted the legacy of the Croix-de-Maufras? She might well take the money too. Then the shiver returned. No, no, never! The money, she would have taken; what she dared not touch, without fear of having her fingers burnt, was this money stolen from a dead man, the abominable money of murder. She calmed down again, she reasoned: this it wasn't to spend it that she would have taken it; on the contrary, she would have hidden him elsewhere, buried in a place known only to her, where he would have slept for eternity; and at this hour it would still be half of the sum saved from her husband's hands. He wouldn't triumph by keeping everything, he wouldn't go and play what belonged to him, to her. When the clock struck three, she mortally regretted having refused to share. A thought came to him, confused, still distant: get up, search under the floor, so that he would have nothing more. Only, such a cold froze her that she did not want to think about it. Take it all, keep it all, without complain! And this project, little by little, imposed itself on her, while a will, stronger than her resistance, grew, from the unconscious depths of her being. She didn't want to, and she jumped out of bed abruptly, because she could n't help it. She raised the wick of the lamp, she went into the dining room.

From then on, Séverine no longer trembled. Her terrors were gone, she proceeded coldly, with the slow and precise gestures of a sleepwalker. She had to look for the poker, which was used to lift the frieze. When the hole was discovered, as she could not see well, she brought the lamp up. But a stupor nailed her down, bent over, motionless: the hole was empty. Obviously, during that she was running to her meeting, Roubaud had gone back upstairs, worked, before her, with the same desire: to take everything, keep everything; and suddenly he had pocketed the tickets, not one was left. She knelt down, all she could see was the watch and the chain, the gold of which glistened in the dust of the joists. A cold rage held her there for a moment, stiffened, half-naked, repeating aloud, twenty times:

“Thief!” thief! thief!

Then, with a furious movement, she grabbed the watch, while a large, disturbed black spider fled along the plaster. With her heels, she replaced the frieze, and she came back to bed, placing the lamp on the night table. When she had hot, she looked at the watch, which she held in her closed fist, turned it over, examined it for a long time. On the case, the two initials of the president, intertwined, interested him. On the inside, she read the number in 2516, a figure manufacturing. It was a very dangerous gem to keep, because justice knew this figure. But, in her anger at having been able to save only that, she was no longer afraid. Even she felt that her nightmares were over, now that there were no more dead bodies under her floor. Finally, she would walk quietly home, wherever she wanted. She slipped the watch to her bedside, turned off the lamp and fell asleep.

The next day, Jacques, who was on leave, had to wait until Roubaud had gone to settle in the Cafe du Commerce, as usual, and then go up to lunch with her. Sometimes when they dared, they would do this part. And that day, while eating, still shivering, she told him about the money, told him how she had found the hiding place empty. Her resentment against her husband did not subside, the same cry returned, incessantly:-

Thief! thief! thief!

Then she brought the watch, she insisted on giving it to Jacques, despite the repugnance he showed.

—Understand then, my darling, no one will look for her at your place. If I keep it, he will take it from me again. And that, you see, I would rather let him tear off a scrap of my flesh… No, he had too much. I didn’t want that money. It horrified me, I would never have spent a penny. But was he allowed to take advantage of it? Oh! I hate him!

She was crying, she insisted, with such supplications, that the young man ended up putting the watch in his waistcoat pocket.

An hour passed, and Jacques had kept Séverine on his knees, still half naked. She was leaning back against his shoulder, one arm around her neck, in a languid caress, when Roubaud, who had a key, entered. With a sudden jump, she was standing. But it was the flagrante delicto, no need to deny. The husband had stopped dead, unable to pass, while the lover remained seated, dumbfounded. So she did n’t even bother with any explanation, she stepped forward and repeated angrily:

“Thief!” thief! thief!

For a second Roubaud hesitated. Then, with the shrug of his shoulders which he was now pushing aside, he entered the room, took out a service notebook, which he had forgotten there. But she pursued him, overwhelmed him.

—You have searched, dare to say that you did not search! … And you have taken everything, thief! thief! thief!

Without a word, he crossed the dining room. At the door only he turned round, enveloping her in his gloomy gaze.

—Leave me alone, eh!

And he left, the door did not even slam. He didn’t seem to have seen, he had made no allusion to this lover who was there.

After a great silence, Séverine turned to Jacques.

—Do you believe!

The latter, who had not said a word, finally got up. And he gave his opinion.

—He is a finished man.

They both agreed. To their surprise at the tolerated lover, after the murdered lover, followed a disgust for the complacent husband. When a man comes to that, he’s in the mud, he can ride all the streams.

From that day on, Séverine and Jacques had complete freedom. They used it without caring more about Roubaud. But now that the husband no longer worried them, their great concern was spying on Madame Lebleu, the neighbor, always on the lookout. Certainly, she suspected something. Jacques might stifle the sound of his footsteps, at each of his visits he saw the opposite door open imperceptibly, while an eye stared at him through the slit. It was becoming intolerable, he no longer dared to go up; for, if he risked it, as we knew there, an ear would stick to the lock; so that it was not possible to kiss each other, nor even to chat freely. And it was then that Séverine, exasperated by this new obstacle to her passion, resumed her old campaign against the Lebleu to have their accommodation. It was well known that the sous-chef had occupied him at all times. But it was no longer the superb view, the windows overlooking the departure courtyard and the heights of Ingouville, that tempted her. The only reason for her desire, which she did not say, was that the apartment had a second entrance, a door opening onto a service staircase. Jacques could go up and go that

way, without Madame Lebleu even suspecting his visits. Finally, they would be free.

The battle was terrible. This question, which already had impassioned the whole corridor, woke up, became poisoned hour by hour. Madame Lebleu, threatened, defended herself desperately, certain of dying of it, if she was locked up in the dark accommodation at the back, blocked by the ridge of the Marquise, with the sadness of a dungeon. How did they want her to live at the bottom of this hole, accustomed to her room so bright, open to the vast horizon, enlivened by the continual movement of travelers? And her legs forbade her to walk, she would never have more than the sight of a zinc roof, she might as well kill her right away. Unfortunately, these were only sentimental reasons, and she was forced to admit that she owned the apartment. the former sous-chef, Roubaud's predecessor, who, celibate, had ceded it to him out of gallantry; even there had to be a letter from her husband pledging to return it, if a new deputy asked for it. As the letter had not yet been found, she denied its existence. As her cause deteriorated, it grew more violent, more aggressive. For a moment she had tried to bring with her, compromising her, Moulin's wife, the other sous-chef, who had seen, she said, men kissing Madame Roubaud on the stairs; and Moulin was angry, because his wife, a sweet and very insignificant creature, whom one never met, swore crying to have seen nothing and said nothing. For eight days this gossip blew the storm from one end of the corridor to the other. But Madame Lebleu's great mistake, the one which was to lead to her defeat, was always to irritate Mademoiselle Guichon, the tobacconist, by her stubborn espionage: it was a mania, the fixed idea that she would find the night every night. station master, the need to surprise her, become sickly, all the more acute because for two years she had been watching him, without having surprised at all, not a breath. And she was sure they were sleeping together, it was driving her crazy. Also Mademoiselle Guichon, furious at not being able to return go out without being spied on, she urged now to be relegated to the courtyard: an apartment would separate them, she would no longer have it at least in front of her, would no longer be forced to pass in front of her door. It was becoming evident that M. Dabadie, the station master, until now disinterested in the struggle, was taking sides against the Lebleu more every day; which was a serious sign.

Further quarrels complicated the situation. Philomène, who was now bringing her fresh eggs to Séverine, was very insolent every time she met Madame Lebleu; and, as she left her door open on purpose, to annoy everyone, in passing, there were continuous disagreeable words between the two women. This intimacy between Séverine and Philomène having come to confidences, the latter had ended up doing Jacques' errands near his mistress, when he did not dare to go upstairs himself. She would arrive with her eggs, change the appointments, say why he must have been careful the day before, tell the time he had stayed at her house, chatting. Jacques sometimes, when an obstacle stopped him, willingly forgot himself in the little house of Sauvagnat, the head of the depot. He followed his driver Pecqueux there, as if, out of a need to be dizzy, evening alone. Even when the chauffeur disappeared, lined up in the sailors' cabarets, he went to Philomène's, gave her a word to say, sat down, did not leave. And little by little, mingled with this love, she grew moved, for she had known only brutal lovers until then. The small hands, the polite manners of this sad boy, who looked very sweet, seemed to her treats which she had not yet bit. With Pecqueux, it was now housework, drunkenness, more harshness than caresses; while, when she spoke a kind word from the mechanic to the sous-chef's wife, she tasted, for herself, the delicate taste of forbidden fruit. One day, she confided in him, complained about the driver, a sly one, she said, under his air of laughter, very capable of a bad blow, the days when he was drunk. He noticed that she took more care of her large body burnt with scanty, desirable despite everything, with her beautiful eyes of passion, drinking less, keeping the house less dirty. His brother Sauvagnat, having heard a man's voice one evening, entered with his hand held high to correct it; but, recognizing the boy who was chatting with her, he had simply offered a bottle of cider. Jacques, well received, cured of his shivering, seemed to like it. So Philomène showed a friendship more and more lively for Séverine, getting angry with Madame Lebleu, whom she everywhere called an old pig.

One night when she had met the two lovers behind her little garden, she accompanied them in the shade, to the shed, where they usually hid.

—Ah well! you are too good. Since the accommodation is yours, I would be the one to pull it by the hair… So hit it!

But Jacques was not for a flash.

—No, no, Monsieur Dabadie is taking care of it, it is better to wait for things to happen regularly.

—Before the end of the month, declared Séverine, I will sleep in her room, and we can meet there at any time.

In spite of the darkness, Philomène had felt her, who, with this hope, squeezed her lover’s arm with tender pressure. And she left them to go home. But, hidden in the shadows, thirty paces away, she stopped and turned around. It caused him great emotion to know them together. She wasn’t jealous though, she had the ignorant need to love and be loved like that.

Jacques grew darker every day. On two occasions, being able to see Séverine, he had invented pretexts; and if he sometimes lingered among the Sauvagnats, it was also to avoid it. Yet he still loved her, with an exasperated desire that had only increased. But, in its Now the terrible pain was taking hold of him again, such dizziness that he quickly freed himself from it, frozen, terrified of no longer being him, of feeling the beast ready to bite. He had tried to throw himself back into the fatigue of long journeys, asking for extra chores, spending twelve hours standing on his machine, his body broken by the trepidation, his lungs burned by the wind. His comrades, for their part, complained about this hard profession of mechanic, which, they said, in twenty years had eaten a man; he would have liked to be eaten right away, he never fell enough weariness, he was only happy when the Lison carried him away, no longer thinking, having only eyes to see the signals. On arrival, he was struck by sleep, without even having time to wash off. Only, with the awakening, returned the torment of the fixed idea. He had also tried to regain his affection for the Lison, spending hours cleaning her again, demanding steels shining like silver from Pecqueux. The inspectors, who were coming up to him on the way, congratulated him. He nodded, remained unhappy; for he knew very well that his machine, since it stopped in the snow, was no longer the healthy, the valiant of the past. Undoubtedly, in the repair of pistons and drawers, it had lost of its soul, this mysterious balance of life, due to the chance of the assembly. He suffered from it, this forfeiture turned to a sorrowful bitterness, to the point that he pursued his superiors with unreasonable complaints, asking for unnecessary repairs, imagining impracticable improvements. They refused him, he grew darker, convinced

that the Lison was very ill and that there was nothing proper to do with her anymore. His tenderness was discouraged by it: what was the use of loving, since he would kill everything he wanted? And he brought to his mistress that desperate rage for love, which neither suffering nor fatigue could wear out.

Séverine had felt it change, also, believing he was sad because of her, since he knew. When she saw him quiver around her neck, avoid her kiss with a sudden recoil, wasn't it that he remembered and that she horrified him? She had never dared to put the conversation back on these things. She repented of having spoken, surprised at the outburst of her confession, in this foreign bed, where they had both burned, not even remembering her distant need for confidence, as satisfied today to have it. with her, at the bottom of this secret. And she loved him, she certainly wanted him more, since he was no longer ignorant of anything. Vs' a creature made only for the caress, entirely a lover, and who was not a mother. She no longer lived except through Jacques, she was not lying, when she said of her effort to melt into him, for she had only one dream, that he should win, that he keep her in his flesh… Very gentle always, very passive, taking pleasure only from him, she would have liked cat sleeps on her knees, from morning to night. From the awful tragedy, she simply kept the astonishment of them have been involved; just as she seemed to have remained a virgin and candid, emerging from the stains of her youth. It was far away, she was smiling, she wouldn't even have been angry with her husband, if he hadn't bothered her. But her loathing for this man increased as her passion grew, her need for the other. Now that the other knew and that he had absolved her, he was the master, the one she would follow, who could dispose of her as his thing. She had had her portrait given, a photographic card; and she slept with it, she fell asleep, her mouth glued to the image, very unhappy since she saw him unhappy, without being able to guess exactly what he was suffering from.

However, their dates continued outside, until they could see each other quietly at her place, in the new accommodation conquered. Winter was ending, February was very mild. They prolonged their walks, walked for hours, through the vacant lots of the station; for he avoided stopping, and when she hung on his shoulders, which he was forced to sit down and possess, he insisted that it be without light, in his terror to strike, if he saw a

corner of his bare skin: as long as he did n’t see, he might resist. In Paris, where she always followed him, every Friday, he carefully closed the curtains, saying that the full light cut his pleasure. This weekly trip, she was doing it now without even giving explanation to her husband. For the neighbors, the old pretext, his knee pain, was useful; and she also said that she was going to kiss her nurse, Mother Victoire, whose convalescence was dragging on in the hospital. Both still took a great distraction there, he very attentive that day to the good driving of his machine, she delighted to see him less gloomy, amused herself by the journey, although she was beginning to know the smallest hillsides., the smallest clumps of trees along the way. From Havre to Motteville, they were meadows, flat fields, cut by living hedges, planted with apple trees; and, as far as Rouen, the country was hunchbacked, deserted. After Rouen, the Seine unfolded. We crossed it at Sotteville, Oissel, Pont-de-l’Arche; then, across the vast plains, it constantly reappeared, widely deployed. From Gaillon on, we never left it, it flowed to the left, slowed down between its low banks, bordered by poplars and willows. We sped along the hillside, we only abandoned it at Bonnières, only to find it suddenly at Rosny, at the exit of the Rolleboise tunnel. She was like the friendly travel companion. Three more times, we crossed it, before the finish. And it was Mantes and its steeple in the trees, Triel with the white spots of its plasterboards, Poissy that was cut right through the heart, both green walls of the forest of Saint-Germain, the slopes of Colombes overflowing with lilacs, the suburbs finally, Paris guessed, glimpse of the Asnières bridge, the distant Arc de triomphe, above the leprous constructions, bristling with chimneys of ’factory. The machine rushed under the Batignolles, we landed in the resounding station; and, until evening, they belonged to each other, they were free. On the way back, it was dark, she closed her eyes, relived her happiness. But, in the morning as in the evening, each time she passed the Croix-de-Maufras, she put her head forward, cast a careful glance, without showing herself, certain to find there, in front of the barrier, Flore standing, presenting the flag in its sheath, enveloping the train in its gaze of flame.

Since this girl, on snowy day, had seen them kissing, Jacques had warned Séverine to be wary of her. He was no longer unaware of what passion of a savage child she pursued him, from the depths of her youth, and he felt her jealous, with a virile energy, with an unbridled and

murderous rancor. On the other hand, she must have known a lot of things, for he remembered her allusion to the president's relationship with a young lady, whom no one suspected, whom he had married. If she knew that, she had surely guessed the crime: no doubt she was going to speak, write, take revenge by denouncing it. the days, the weeks had passed, and nothing happened, he still only found her planted at her post, at the edge of the track, with her flag, stiffened. From the farthest she could see the machine, he had on him the sensation of her ardent eyes. She saw him despite the smoke, took him whole, accompanied him in the flash of speed, in the midst of the thunder of the wheels. And the train, at the same time, was sounded, pierced, visited, from the first to the last car. Always, she discovered the other, the rival, that now she knew there, every Friday. The other might have pushed his head a little forward, out of an imperious need to see: she was seen, their eyes met like swords. Already the train was fleeing, devouring, and there was one that remained on the ground, powerless to follow it, in the rage of this happiness which it carried away. She seemed to be growing, Jacques would find her higher on each trip, worried now that she was doing nothing, wondering what project was going to ripen in this tall dark girl, whose immobile appearance he could not avoid.

An employee too, Henri Dauvergne, the head driver, bothered Séverine and Jacques. He was in fact driving that Friday train, and he was showing an unwelcome kindness to the young woman. Noticing his affair with the mechanic, he said to himself that his turn might come. When leaving Le Havre, on the mornings he was on duty, Roubaud laughed at it, Henri's attentions became so clear: he reserved an entire compartment for her, he set her up, felt the hot water bottle. One day, the husband, who quietly continued to talk to Jacques, showed him, with a blink of his eyes, the young man's merry-go-round, as if to ask him if he tolerated it. Moreover, in quarrels, he bluntly accused his wife of sleeping with the two. She had imagined for a moment that Jacques believed him and that, from there, came his sorrows. At in the midst of a fit of sobbing, she had protested her innocence, telling him to kill her, if she was unfaithful. So he had joked, very pale, kissing her, telling her that he knew her to be honest and that he hoped he would never kill anyone.

But the first evenings of March were dreadful, they had to interrupt their meetings; and the trips to Paris, the few hours of freedom, sought so far

away, were no longer enough for Séverine. It was, within her, a growing need to have Jacques to her, all to her, to live together, the days, the nights, without ever leaving each other. Her hatred for her husband grew worse, morbid, intolerable excitement. So docile, with the complacency of a tender woman, she grew irritated when it came to him, lashed out at the slightest obstacle he put to her wishes. So it seemed that the shadow of his black hair darkened the clear blue of his eyes. She was growing fierce, she accused him of having spoiled her existence, to the point that life was now impossible, side by side. Wasn't it he who had done everything? if nothing more existed of their household, if she had a lover, wasn't it her fault? The heavy tranquility in which she saw him, the indifferent look with which he welcomed his anger, his round back, his enlarged belly, gloom which resembled happiness, finished exasperating her, she who was in pain. To break up, to go away, to go and start living elsewhere, she thought only of that. Oh! to start again, above all to prevent the past from existing, to start life anew before all these abominations, to find herself as she was at fifteen, and to love, and to be loved, and to live as she dreamed of living then! For eight days, she cherished a plan of escape: she left with Jacques, they hid in Belgium, they settled there in young laborious household. But she did not even speak to him about it, immediately impediments had occurred, the irregularity of the situation, the trembling constant where they would be, especially the boredom of leaving her husband his fortune, the money, the Croix-de-Maufras. By a donation to the last living, they had bequeathed everything; and she was in her power, in that legal tutelage of the woman, who bound her hands. Rather than leave giving up a penny, she would have preferred to die there. One day when he came up, livid, to say that while crossing in front of a locomotive, he had felt the tampon brush his elbow, she thought that if he were dead, she would be free. She was looking at him with her big fixed eyes: why didn't he die, since she no longer loved him, and he was bothering everyone now?

From then on, Séverine's dream changed. Roubaud had died of an accident, and she was leaving with Jacques for America. But they were married, they had sold Croix-de-Maufras, made all the fortune. Behind them, they left no fear. If they expatriated, it was to be reborn, in each other's arms. There, nothing would be what she wanted to forget, she could believe that life was new. Since she was wrong, she would resume the

experience of happiness at the beginning. He would find an occupation; she herself would undertake something; it would be fortune, children no doubt, a new existence of work and congratulated. As soon as she was alone, in the morning in bed, during the day while embroidering, she relapsed into that imagination, corrected it, enlarged it, ceaselessly added happy details to it, ended by believing herself filled with joy and goods. She, who formerly went out so rarely, had at this hour the passion to go see the liners leave: she went down on the jetty, leaned on her elbows, followed the smoke of the ship until it had merged with the mists. offshore; and she split into two, fancied herself on the bridge with Jacques, already far from France, on the way to the dreamed paradise.

One evening in the middle of March, the young man, having risked going up to see her at her place, told her that he had just brought from Paris, in his train, one of her old school friends, who was leaving for New York, to exploit a new invention, a machine for making buttons; and, as he needed an associate, a mechanic, he had even offered to take him with him. Oh! a superb affair, which would hardly require more than a contribution of about thirty thousand francs, and in which there were perhaps millions to be gained. He was saying this just to chat, adding, moreover, that he had, of course, refused the offer. However, the heart was a little heavy, because it is still hard to give up the fortune,

Séverine listened to him, standing, staring lost. Wasn't it his dream that was going to come true?

—Ah! She whispered at last, we would be leaving tomorrow…

He looked up, surprised.

—How would we leave?

—Yes, if he was dead.

She had not named Roubaud, only indicating him with a movement of the chin. But he understood, he made a vague gesture to say that, unfortunately, he was not dead.

"We would leave," she continued in her slow, deep voice, "we would be so happy there! The thirty thousand francs, I would get them by selling the property; and I would still have enough to install us… You, you would make all this worth; I would arrange a small interior, where we would love each other with all our strength… Oh! that would be good, that would be so good!"

And she added very low:-

Far from all recollection, only new days before us!

He was overcome with great gentleness, their hands joined, instinctively squeezed, and neither of them chatted, both absorbed in this hope. Then it was she who spoke again.

—You should still see your friend before he leaves, and beg him not to take a partner without warning you.

Again he was amazed.

—Why is that?

—My God! do we know? The other day with this locomotive, one second longer, and I was free… We're alive in the morning, aren't we? we died in the evening.

She looked at him fixedly, she repeated:

Ah! if he was dead!

"You don't want me to kill him, though?" he asked, trying to smile.

Three times she said no; but her eyes said yes, her eyes of a tender woman, all with the inexorable cruelty of her passion. Since he had killed another, why shouldn't they have killed him? It had just sprouted in her, suddenly, like a consequence, a necessary end. Kill him and walk away, nothing so simple. Him dead, everything would end, she could start all over again. Already, she no longer saw possible, his resolution was taken, absolute; while, with a slight movement, she continued to say no, not having the courage of her violence.

He, leaning against the sideboard, still affected to smile. He had just seen the knife lying there.

—If you want me to kill him, you have to give me the knife… I already have the watch, it will give me a little museum.

He laughed louder. She answered gravely:

"Take the knife."

And, when he had put it in his pocket, as if to push the joke to the end, he kissed it.

—Well! now, good evening… I'll go see my friend right away, I'll tell him to wait… Saturday, if it doesn't rain, come join me behind the Sauvagnat house. Huh? it's understood… And don't worry, we won't kill anyone, it's a joke.

However, in spite of the late hour, Jacques went down to the port to find, at the hotel where he was to sleep, the comrade who was leaving the next day. He told her about a possible inheritance, asked for two weeks, before giving her a definitive answer. Then, on his way back to the station, through the big black avenues, he thought, was astonished at his approach. Had he resolved to kill Roubaud, since he already had his wife and his money? No, of course, he hadn't decided anything, he didn't take precautions without doubt as well, that in the event that he would decide. But the memory of Séverine evoked, the burning pressure of her hand, her fixed gaze that said yes, when her mouth said no. obviously, she wanted him to kill the other. He was seized with great confusion, what was he going to do?

Back in the rue François-Mazeline, lying near Pecqueux, who was snoring, Jacques could not sleep. In spite of himself, his brain was working on this idea of murder, this outline of a drama which he was arranging, of which he was calculating the most distant consequences. He was looking for, he was discussing the reasons for, the reasons against. In short, on reflection, coldly, without any fever, all were in favor. Roubaud does the only obstacle to his happiness? Him dead, he married Séverine whom he adored, he no longer hid himself, possessed her for ever, entirely. Then there was the money, a fortune. He was quitting his hard job, becoming a boss in his turn, in this America, whose comrades he heard talking about, as in a country where mechanics shoveled gold with shovels. His new existence there was like a dream: a woman who loved him passionately, millions to earn right away, a large life, unlimited ambition, whatever he wanted. And, to make this dream come true, nothing but a gesture to make, nothing but a man to suppress, the beast, the plant which hinders walking, and which one crushes. not even interesting, this man, fattened, weighed down at this hour, buried in this stupid love of the game, in which his old energies were obscured. Why spare him? No circumstance, absolutely none, pleaded in his favor. Everything condemned him, since, in answer to each question, the interest of others was that he died. To hesitate would be foolish and cowardly.

But Jacques, whose back was burning, and who had placed himself on his stomach, turned around with a bound, with the start of a thought, vague until then, suddenly so acute that he had felt it like a point in his skull. He, who from childhood wanted to kill, who was ravaged to the point of torture

by fixed, why didn’t he kill Roubaud? Perhaps, on this chosen victim, he would forever satisfy his need for murder; and in this way he would not only get a good deal, he would also be healed. Cured, my God! to no longer have this shiver of blood, to be able to possess Séverine, without this fierce awakening of the old male, carrying the disemboweled females around his neck ! A sweat flooded him, he saw himself, knife in hand, slapping Roubaud in the throat, as he had struck the president, and satisfied, and sated, as the wound bled on his hands. He would kill him, he was determined, since there was healing, the adored woman, fortune. To kill one, if he had to kill, that was the one he would kill, at least knowing what he was doing, reasonably, for self-interest and logic.

This decision taken, as three o’clock in the morning had just struck, Jacques tried to sleep. He was already losing consciousness, when a deep shake lifted him, made him sit in his bed, suffocating. Kill this man, my God! did he have the right? When a fly bothered him, he crushed it with a slap. One day when a cat had embarrassed himself in his legs, he had kicked his back, unwittingly it is true. But this man, his like! He had to go back to all his reasoning, to prove his right to murder, strong that annoy the weak, and which eat them. It was he, at this hour, that the other’s wife loved, and she herself wanted to be free to marry him, to bring him what was good. He was simply removing the obstacle. In the woods, if two wolves meet, when a wolf is there, the stronger one does not get rid of the other, with a rant? And, formerly, when men took shelter, like wolves, in the depths of caves, was not the woman desired from the band who could conquer her, in the blood of rivals? So, since it was the law of life, we had to obey it, apart from the scruples that to live together. Little by little, his right seemed absolute to him, he felt his entire resolution reborn: the next day, he would choose the place and time, he would prepare the act. The best, no doubt, would be to stab Roubaud at night, in the station, during one of his rounds, so as to make believe that marauders, surprised, had killed him. Out there, behind the coal heaps, he knew a good place, if he could be drawn there. Despite his effort to fall asleep, now he was arranging the scene, discussing where he would stand, how he would strike, in order to lay it stiff; and, silently, invincibly, as he descended to the smallest details, his repugnance returned, a interior protest which raised him whole again. No, no, he wouldn’t hit! It seemed monstrous, unworkable, impossible. In

him, civilized man rebelled, the strength acquired from education, the slow and indestructible scaffolding of transmitted ideas. We should not kill, he had sucked that with the milk of generations; his refined brain, furnished with scruples, repulsed murder with horror as soon as he began to reason with it. Yes, to kill in a need, in an outburst of instinct! But to kill by wanting it, by calculation and by interest, no, never, never he could!

The day was dawning, when Jacques managed to doze off, and drowsiness so light that the debate continued in him confusedly, abominable. The days that followed were the most painful of his life. He was avoiding Séverine, he had told her not to be at the meeting on Saturday, fearing his eyes. But on Monday he had to see her again; and, as he feared, his big blue eyes, so soft, so deep, filled him with anguish. She didn't speak of it, she did n't make a gesture, not a word to push him. Only his eyes were only full of the thing, questioned him, begged him. He did not know how to avoid impatience and reproach, he always found them fixed on his own, with the astonishment that he could hesitate to be happy. When he left her, he kissed her, a hard hug, to let her know that he was resolved. He was indeed, he was to the bottom of the stairs, relapsed into the struggle of his conscience. When he saw her again two days later, he had the confused pallor, the furtive gaze of a coward, who recoils from a necessary act. She burst into tears, without saying anything, weeping around her neck, horribly unhappy; and he, upset, overflowed with self-contempt. It was necessary to end it.

—Thursday, over there, will you? she asked in a low voice.

—Yes, Thursday, I will wait for you.

That Thursday the night was very dark, and deaf, laden with sea mists. As usual, Jacques, who arrived first, standing behind the Sauvagnat house, watched for Séverine's arrival. But the darkness was so thick, and she came running with such a light step that he shuddered, brushed against her, without noticing her. Already, she was in his arms, worried to feel him shaking.

"I scared you," she whispered.

—No, no, I was waiting for you… Let's walk, no one can see us.

And, with their arms tied at their waist, they slowly walked through the wasteland. On this side of the depot, gas lamps were rare; certain shadows

were completely lacking made; while they swarmed in the distance, towards the station, like living sparks.

For a long time they went on like this, without a word. She had put her head on his shoulder, sometimes she raised it, kissed him on the chin; and, bending over, he kissed her back on the temple, at the roots of her hair. The grave and unique blow of one o'clock in the morning had struck distant churches. If they did n't speak, it was because they could hear themselves think, in their embrace. They only thought about it, they couldn't be together anymore, without being obsessed with it. The debate continued, what was the point of saying unnecessary words out loud, since we had to act? When she stood up against him for a caress, she could feel the knife, denting the pocket of her pants. Was it therefore that he was resolved?

But her thoughts overwhelmed her, her lips parted with a barely distinct breath.

—All hour, it went up, I did not know why… Then I saw him take his revolver, he had forgotten… This is, for sure, he will do a round.

Silence fell, and only twenty paces farther on, he said in his turn: "The marauders, last night, removed lead around here… He will come soon, that's for sure."

So she gave a little shudder, and they both went back to dumb, walking slowly. A doubt had seized her: was it really the knife swelling her pocket? Twice, she kissed him, the better to realize. Then, as, by rubbing herself thus along his leg, she remained uncertain, she let her hand hang down, felt her while kissing him again. It was the knife. But he, having understood, had suddenly suffocated her on his chest; and he stammered in her ear: "He will come, you will be free."

The murder was decided, it seemed to them that they were no longer walking, that a foreign force was carrying them down to the ground. Their senses had suddenly taken on an extreme sharpness, the touch especially, because their hands one in the other were sore, the slightest touch of their lips became like a fingernail. They could also hear the noises that were lost just now, the rolling, the distant breath of machines, muffled shocks, wandering footsteps, in the depths of darkness. And they saw at night, they could make out the black spots of things, as if a mist had gone from their eyelids: a bat passed, whose sharp hooks they could follow. At the corner of

a pile of coal, they had stopped, motionless, ears and eyes on the alert, in a tension of their whole being. Now they were whispering.

—Didn’t you hear a cry of appeal over there?

—No, it’s a wagon that is being handed over.

—But there, on our left, someone is walking. The sand screamed.

—No, no, rats run in the heaps, the coal is pouring out.

Minutes passed. Suddenly it was she who hugged him tighter.

—Here it is.

—Or so? I see nothing.

—He turned the hangar at low speed, he is coming straight to us… Here! his shadow passing over the white wall!

—You think, this dark spot… So it is alone?

—Yes, alone, he is alone.

And, at this decisive moment, she threw herself madly on his neck, she pressed her ardent mouth to his. It was a kiss from living flesh, prolonged, where she would have liked to give him blood. How she loved him and how she hated the other! Ah! if she had dared, she herself would have done the job twenty times already, to avoid her horror; but her hands were failing, she felt too soft, she needed a man’s grip. And this never-ending kiss was all she could breathe with her courage, the full possession she promised him, the communion of her body. In the distance, a machine whistled, uttering into the night a wail of melancholy distress; with regular blows, we heard a crash, the shock of a giant hammer, coming from who knew not where; while the mists, rises of the sea, put to the sky a parade of a marching chaos, whose wandering tears seemed at times to extinguish the sharp sparks of the gas lamps. When she finally took her mouth away, she had nothing more of her own, she thought she had passed through him.

With a swift gesture, he had already opened the knife. But he stifled a curse.

—For God Sake! it’s over, he’s leaving!

It was true, the moving shadow, after approaching them, about fifty paces away, had just turned left and was walking away, with the regular step of a night watchman, whom nothing worries about…

So she pushed him.

—Go, go!

And they both left, him in front, her in her heels, both spun, slipped behind the man, chasing, avoiding the noise. For a moment, around the corner of the repair shops, they lost sight of him; then, as they cut short while crossing a siding, they found him, twenty paces at most. They had to take advantage of the smallest ends of the wall for shelter, a simple misstep would have betrayed them.

“We won’t have it,” he growled dully. If he reaches the switchman’s post, he escapes.

She always kept repeating in her neck:

“Go, go!”

At this moment, by these vast flat lands, drowned in darkness, in the midst of this nocturnal desolation of a large station, he was resolute, as in the solitude complicit in a cutthroat. And, while furtively hastening his step, he got excited, reasoned again, gave himself the arguments which were going to make this murder a wise, legitimate action, logically debated and decided. It was indeed a right that he exercised, the very right to life, since this blood of another was essential to his very existence. Just that hammer knife, and he had won happiness.

“We won’t have it, we won’t have it,” he repeated furiously, seeing the shadow pass the switchman’s post. It’s over, here he is.

But, with her nervous hand, suddenly she grabbed him by the arm, immobilized him against her.

—See, he’s coming back!

Roubaud, in fact, was returning. He had turned right, then went down again. Perhaps, behind his back, he had had the vague feeling of the murderers being launched on his trail. However, he continued to walk with his quiet step, a conscientious guardian, who does not want to return, without having looked everywhere.

Halted in their course, Jacques and Séverine did not move. Chance had planted them at the very corner of a pile of coal. They leaned against it, seemed to enter, their spines glued to the black wall, confused, lost in this pool of ink. They were breathless.

And Jacques watched Roubaud come straight to them. Barely thirty meters separated them, each step diminishing the distance, regularly, punctuated as by the inexorable pendulum of fate. Another twenty paces, ten more: he would have her in front of him, he would raise his arm this

way, stick the knife in her throat, pulling from right to left, to stifle the cry. The seconds seemed interminable to him, such a flood of thoughts crossed the void of his skull that the measure of time was abolished. All the reasons that determined him passed once more, he clearly saw the murder, the causes and the consequences. Five more steps. Her resolution, strained to break, remained unshakeable. He wanted to kill, he knew why he would kill.

But, two steps, one step away, it was a debacle. Everything collapsed in him, suddenly. No no! he would not kill, he could not kill this defenseless man like that. Reasoning would never do the murder, it took the instinct to bite, the leap that throws at the prey, the hunger or the passion that tears it apart. What did it matter if the conscience was made only of ideas transmitted by a slow heredity of justice! He didn’t feel he had the right to kill, and no matter what, he couldn’t persuade himself that he could take it.

Roubaud quietly passed. His elbow brushed both others in coal. A breath had detected them; but they remained as dead. The arm did not rise, did not insert the knife. Nothing made the thick darkness shudder, not even a shiver. He was already far away, ten paces away, and still motionless, their backs nailed to the black heap, both remained breathless, in the terror of this lonely man, helpless, who had just brushed past them, walking so peaceful.

Jacques gave a choking sob with rage and shame.

—I can not! I can not!

He wanted to take Séverine back, lean on her, in a need to be excused, consoled. Without saying a word, she escaped. He had stretched out his hands, had only felt her skirt slip between his fingers; and he could hear only her slight flight. In vain, he pursued her for a moment, for this sudden disappearance completely upset him. was she so sorry for her weakness? Did she despise him? Caution prevented him from joining her. But, when he found himself alone in these vast flat lands, stained with the little yellow tears of the gas, a terrible despair seized him, he hastened to get out of it, to go and ruin his head at the bottom of his pillow, to destroy it. the abomination of its existence.

It was about ten days later, towards the end of March, that the Roubauds finally triumphed over the Lebleu. The administration had recognized their request just, supported by Mr. Dabadie; all the more so since the famous letter from the cashier, committing to return the accommodation, if a new

deputy asked for it, had just been found by Mademoiselle Guichon, while searching for old accounts in the archives of the station. And immediately Madame Lebleu, exasperated by her defeat, spoke of moving: since they wanted her dead, it was as well to end it without waiting. For three days, this memorable move fired the hallway. Little Madame Moulin herself, so withdrawn that you never saw either entering or leaving, compromised herself by carrying Séverine's work table from one apartment to the other. But Philomène especially breathed the discord, come there to help from the first hour, packing up, jostling the furniture, invading the front apartment, before the tenant had left it; and it was she who expelled him from him, in the midst of the stampede of the two pieces of furniture, mixed up, confused, in the transhipment. She had come to show, for Jacques and for all that he loved, such zeal that Pecqueux, astonished, taken by suspicion, had asked him with his sly wicked demeanor, his vengeful drunkard air, if so. It was at this time that she was sleeping with her mechanic, warning him that he would settle their account for both of them, the day he caught them. His crush on the young man had some grown up, she made herself their servant, to him and to his mistress, in the hope of having her a little to herself, by putting herself between them. When she took the last chair, the doors banged. Then, seeing a stool forgotten by the cashier, she opened it again and threw it across the corridor. It was over.

Then, slowly, existence resumed its monotonous train. While Madame Lebleu, on the back, nailed by her rheumatism to the bottom of her armchair, was dying of boredom, with big tears in her eyes, to see only the zinc of the marquise blocking the sky, Séverine was working on his endless coverlet, installed near one of the front windows. She had, under her, the gay agitation of the departure courtyard, the continual stream of pedestrians and cars; the hasty spring was already turning the buds of the large trees green along the sidewalks; and beyond, the distant slopes of Ingouville unrolled their wooded slopes, dotted with white spots of country houses. But she was astonished to take so little pleasure in finally realizing this dream, to be there, in this coveted accommodation, to have space, daylight, sun in front of you. Even, like her cleaning lady, Mother Simon, growled, furious at not getting back to her habits, she was impatient, she regretted by moments her old hole, as she said, where dirt was less visible. Roubaud had simply let it go. He did not seem to know that he had changed niche: he was

often still mistaken, only noticing his mistake when his new key did not fit in the old lock. Moreover, he was absent more and more, the disorganization continued. For a moment, however, he seemed to revive himself under the awakening of his political ideas; not that they were very clear, very fiery; but he kept his business with the sub-prefect at heart, which had almost cost him his job. Since the empire, shaken by the general elections, went through a terrible crisis, he triumphed, he repeated that these people would not always be the masters. A friendly warning from M. Dabadie, warned by Mademoiselle Guichon, in front of whom the revolutionary words had been made, is enough to calm him down. Since the corridor was quiet and we were living in harmony, now that Madame Lebleu was weakening, killed with sadness, why the new troubles with government affairs? He made a simple gesture, he didn’t care about politics, like anything! And, fatter every day, without remorse, he walked away with heavy steps, his back indifferent.

Between Jacques and Séverine, the embarrassment had grown since they could meet at any time. Nothing prevented them from being happy, he went up to see her by the other staircase, when he pleased, without fear of being spied on; and the lodging belonged to them, he would have slept there, if he had had the audacity to do so. But it was the unrealized, the desired act, agreed to by the two of them, which he did not perform and whose thought, henceforth, put between them an uneasiness, an insurmountable wall. He, who brought the shame of his weakness, found it every time darker, sick with needless waiting. Their lips no longer even sought each other, for they had exhausted this half-possession; it was all the happiness they wanted, the departure, marriage there, the other life.

One evening, Jacques found Séverine in tears; and, when she saw him, she did not stop, she sobbed harder, hanging from her neck. She had already cried like that, but he soothed her with a hug; while, on his heart, he felt her this time ravaged by a growing despair, as he pressed her more. He was upset, he ended up taking her head between his two hands; and, looking at her closely, in the depths of his drowned eyes, he swore, realizing that if she was in despair thus, it was to be a woman, not to dare to strike herself, in her passive gentleness.

—Forgive me, wait a little longer… I swear to you, that I can.

Immediately, she stuck her mouth to his, as if to seal this oath, and they had one of those deep kisses, where they merged, in the communion of their flesh.

X

Aunt Phasie had died Thursday evening at nine o’clock, in a last convulsion; and, in vain, Misard, who was waiting near his bed, had tried to close his eyelids: the obstinate eyes remained open, the head had stiffened, leaning a little on the shoulder, as if to look in the room, while that a withdrawal of the lips seemed to curl them up, with a mocking laugh. A single candle was burning, planted in the corner of a table, near her. And the trains which, for nine hours, had passed there at full speed, in the ignorance of this still lukewarm corpse, shook her for a second, under the flickering flame of the candle.

Immediately, Misard, in order to get rid of Flore, sent her to declare her death in Doinville. She couldn’t be back before eleven o’clock, he had two hours ahead of him. Quietly, he first cut himself a piece of bread, because he felt hungry, not having had dinner, because of this never-ending agony. And he ate standing up, coming and going, putting things away. Coughing fits stopped him, doubled over, half dead himself, so thin, so puny, with his dull eyes and bleached hair, that he did not seem to have to enjoy his victory for long. No matter, he had eaten her, this chick, this tall and beautiful woman, as an insect eats an oak; she was on her back, finished, reduced to nothing, and still lasted for him. But an idea made him kneel down in order to take a bowl under the bed, in which there was a remnant of bran water, prepared for an enema: since she suspected the blow, it was no longer in the room. salt, it was in his enemas that he put rat poison; and, too stupid, not suspicious of that side, she had swallowed it all the same, good this time. As soon as he had emptied the terrine outside, he came back in, washed the room tile with a sponge, soiled with stains. So why had she persisted? She had wanted to be smart, too bad! When, in a household, we play at who will bury the other, without putting the world in the dispute, we open our eyes. He was proud of it, he sneered at it like a good story, drugs so innocently swallowed from below, when she watched so carefully everything that came in from above. At this moment, an express which

passed, enveloped the low house in such a stormy breath that, in spite of the habit, he turned to the window, with a start. Ah! yes, this continual flood, this world come from everywhere, which knew nothing of what it was crushing on the way, which did not care, it was so eager to go to hell! And, behind the train, in the heavy silence, he met the wide open eyes of the dead woman, whose fixed pupils seemed to follow her every movement, while the upturned corners of her lips laughed.

Misard, so phlegmatic, was seized with a small movement of anger. He could hear well, she said to him: Look! seek! But surely she did not take them with her, her thousand francs; and now that she was gone he would find them eventually. Shouldn’t she have given them good heart? that would have avoided all this trouble. Eyes everywhere followed him. Seek! seek! This room, where he had not dared to search, as long as she had lived there, he looked around it. In the cupboard, first: he took the keys under the bolster, turned upside down the boards loaded with linen, emptied the two drawers, even took them out, to see if there was no hiding place. No nothing! Then he thought of the nightstand. He peeled off the marble, turned it over, unnecessarily. Behind the fireplace mirror, a thin fairground mirror, fixed by two nails, he also carried out a sounding, slipped a flat ruler, only removed a black flake of dust. Seek! seek! So, to escape the wide open eyes he felt on him, he got down on all fours, hitting the tile with light punches, listening if some resonance did not reveal a void to him. Several tiles were unsealed, he tore them off. Nothing, still nothing! When he was up again, his eyes caught him again, he turned, wanted to fix his gaze on the dead woman’s gaze; while, from the corner of her curled lips, she accentuated her terrible laughter. He didn’t doubt it anymore, she laughed at him. Seek! seek! He was seized with fever, and he approached her, overcome with suspicion, with a sacrilegious idea, which still paled his pale face. Why did he have believed that, surely, she was not taking them, her thousand francs? perhaps all the same she carried them away. And he dared to discover her, to undress her, he visited her, looked for all the folds of her limbs since she told him to look. Under her, behind her neck, behind her back, he searched. The bed was upset, he thrust his arm up to his shoulder in the mattress. He found nothing. Seek! seek! And his head, which had fallen back on the messy pillow, was still looking at him with its mocking eyes.

As Misard, furious and trembling, tried to arrange the bed, Flore came home, back from Doinville.

“It will be the day after tomorrow, Saturday, eleven o’clock,” she said.

She was talking about the funeral. But, at a glance, she understood what job Misard had run out of steam during her absence. She made a gesture of dismissive indifference.

—Leave then, you will not find them.

He imagined that she too was braving him. And, coming forward, clenched teeth :

“She gave them to you, you know where they are.”

The idea that her mother might have given her thousand francs to someone, even to her, her daughter, made her shrug.

—Ah! ouitche! given… Given to the earth, yes! … Look, they are over there, you can search.

And, with a broad gesture, she indicated the whole house, the garden with its well, the railway line, the whole vast countryside. Yes, over there, at the bottom of a hole, somewhere where no one would ever find them again. Then, while, beside himself, anxious, he resumed jostling the furniture, banging on the walls, without being shy in front of her, the young girl, standing near the window, continued in a low voice:

—Oh ! it’s mild outside, the beautiful night! … I walked quickly, the stars light up as in broad daylight… Tomorrow, what beautiful weather, at sunrise!

For a moment, Flore remained in front of the window, her eyes in this serene countryside, touched by the first warmth of April, and from which she returned pensive, suffering more from the wound. heightened by his torment. But, when she heard Misard leave the room and go after the neighboring rooms, she approached the bed in her turn, she sat down, staring at her mother. At the corner of the table the candle was still burning with a high, still flame. A train passed, which shook the house.

Flore’s resolution was to stay the night there, and she was thinking. First, the sight of the dead drew her from her obsession, from the thing that haunted her, which she had debated under the stars, in the peace of darkness, all along the road to Doinville. A surprise, now, put to sleep her suffering: why had she not had more sorrow, at the death of her? mother? and why was she not still crying at this hour? She liked him, however,

despite her savagery of a tall, silent girl, escaping ceaselessly, beating the fields, as soon as she was not on duty. Twenty times, during the last fit that was to kill her, she had come to sit there begging her to call a doctor; because she suspected Misard's move, she hoped that fear would stop her. But she had never obtained from the patient other than an enraged person, as if the latter had taken pride in the struggle not to accept help from anyone, certain of victory all the same, since she would win the victory. silver; and, then, she does point, resuming herself from her illness, disappearing, galloping to forget. It was this, certainly, which barred his heart: when one has too great a sorrow, there is no more room for another; her mother was gone, she saw her there, destroyed, so pale, without being able to be sadder, in spite of her effort. Calling the gendarmes, denouncing Misard, what was the point, since everything was going to collapse? And, little by little, invincibly, although her gaze remained fixed on the dead woman, she ceased to see her, she returned to her inner vision, completely reconquered by the idea which had stuck its nail in her skull, no 'having more than the sensation of the deep shaking of trains, whose passage, for her, struck the hours.

For a moment, in the distance, the approach of a Paris omnibus had been growling. When the machine finally passed in front of the window, with its lantern, there was a flash of lightning in the room, a fire.

"Eighteen past one," she thought. Seven more hours. This morning, at sixteen o'clock, they will pass.

Every week, for months, this expectation obsessed him. She knew that, on Friday morning, the express, driven by Jacques, also took Séverine to Paris; and she no longer lived, in jealous torture, except to watch for them, to see them, to tell herself that they were going to possess themselves freely, over there. Oh! this train which fleeing, this abominable feeling of not being able to hang on to the last car, in order to be carried away too! It seemed to him that all these wheels cut his heart. She had suffered so much that one evening she went into hiding, wanting to write to justice; for it would be over if she could have this woman arrested; and she, who had once surprised her filth with President Grandmorin, suspected that by telling the judges that, she would deliver her. But, pen in hand, she could never turn the thing. And then, would justice listen to him? All these beautiful people had to get along. Maybe it would be her that we would put

in prison, as we had put there Cabuche. No! she wanted revenge, she would avenge herself alone, without needing anyone. It wasn't even a thought of revenge, as she heard it be, the thought of hurting to heal her own; it was a need to put an end to it, to overturn everything, as if thunder had swept them away. She was very proud, stronger and more beautiful than the other, convinced of her right to be loved; and, when she went away alone, along the paths of this land of wolves, with her heavy helmet of blond hair, still naked, she would have liked to hold her, the other, to settle their quarrel in the corner of a wood, like two enemy warriors. Never before had a man touched her, she beat the males; and it was her invincible strength, she would be victorious.

The week before, the sudden idea had planted itself, sunk into her, as if under a hammer blow she did not know where from: kill them, so that they do not pass, that they do not go. more there together. She did not reason, she obeyed the savage instinct to destroy. When a thorn remained in her flesh, she would pull it out, she would have cut her finger. The kill, kill the first time they pass; and, for that, to overturn the train, to drag a beam on the track, to tear off a rail, finally, to break everything, to swallow everything up. Him, certainly, on his machine, he would stay there, his limbs flattened; the woman, still in the first car, to be nearer, could not escape; as for the others, of this continual flood of people, she did not even think of it. It was nobody, did she know them? And this crushing of a train, this sacrifice of so many lives, became the obsession of each of her hours, the only catastrophe, large enough, deep enough in blood and human pain, for her to be able to bathe her in it. huge heart, swollen with tears.

Yet by Friday morning, she had faltered, not yet having decided where or how she would remove a rail. But in the evening, no longer on duty, she had an idea, she went, through the tunnel, prowling until the junction of Dieppe. It was one of her walks, this subterranean half a league long, this arched avenue, very straight, where she had the emotion of trains rolling on her, with their blinding lantern: each time, she lacked light. to have it crushed there, and it must have been this peril that attracted him there, in a need of bravado. But, that evening, after having escaped the watchman's watch and stepped forward to the middle of the tunnel, keeping to the left, so as to be sure that any train coming in front would pass to her right, she had had the go back, precisely to follow the lanterns of a train going to Le

Havre; and, when she had started up again, a misstep having again caused her to turn on herself, she no longer knew which way the red lights had just disappeared. Despite her courage, still stunned by the noise of the wheels, she had stopped, her hands cold, her bare hair lifted with a breath of terror. Now, when another train passed, she imagined that she would no longer know if it was going up or down, she would throw herself to the right or to the left, and would be haphazardly cut off. With an effort, she tried to retain her reason, to remember, to discuss. Then, terror had carried her, at random, straight ahead, in a furious gallop. No no! she didn't want to be killed, until she had killed the other two! Her feet got tangled in the rails, she slipped, fell, ran harder. It was the madness of the tunnel, the walls which seemed to tighten to embrace it, the vault which echoed imaginary noises, voices of threat, formidable rumblings. Every moment she turned her head, believing that she felt the hot breath of a machine on her neck. Twice, a sudden certainty that she was mistaken, that she would be killed on the side where she was fleeing, made her suddenly change the direction of her course. And she was galloping, she was galloping, when, in front of her, in the distance, there appeared a star, a round and flaming eye, which grew larger. But she had bandaged herself against the irresistible urge to retrace her steps again. The eye became a blaze, a devouring mouth of an oven. Blinded, she had jumped to the left, without knowing; and the train passed like thunder, only blowing it with its stormy wind. Five minutes later, she came out towards Malaunay, safe and sound.

It was nine o'clock, a few more minutes, and the Paris express would be there. Immediately, she had continued, with a step for a walk, until the junction of Dieppe, two hundred meters, examining the way, seeking if some circumstance could serve it. Precisely, on the Dieppe track, under repair, a ballast train was parked, which his friend Ozil had just directed there; and, in a sudden illumination, she found, agreed upon a plan: simply to prevent the switchman from putting the needle back on the track at Le Havre, so that the express would break against the ballast train. This Ozil, since the day when he had rushed on her, drunk with desire, and when she had half slit his skull with a blow of a stick, she kept him friendly, loved to give him back unforeseen visits, through the tunnel, in a goat escaping from his mountain. Former military, very thin and not very talkative, all at the left-luggage office, he had not yet been negligent to reproach himself with,

his eyes open day and night. Only this savage, who had beaten him, strong as a boy, was turning his flesh, just with a call from her little finger. Although he was fourteen years older than her, he wanted her, and had vowed to have her, being patient, being kind, since the violence had not succeeded. So that night, in the shadows, when she had approached her post, calling her outside, he had joined her, forgetting everything. She stunned him, took him to the countryside, told him complicated stories, would not stay at Croix-de-Maufras if it lost it. His ear, in the distance, watched for the roar of the express, leaving Malaunay, approaching at full speed. And, when she felt it there, she turned around to see. But she had not thought of the new interlocking devices: the machine, on entering the Dieppe road, had just by itself put the signal to a halt; and the engineer had had time to stop, a few paces from the ballast train. Ozil, with the cry of a man who wakes up under a collapsed house, ran back to his post; while she, stiffened, motionless, followed, from the depths of darkness, the accident. Two days later, the displaced switchman came to bid her farewell, suspecting nothing, begging her to join him as soon as she was no longer her mother. Let’s go! the blow was missed, it was necessary to find something else.

At that moment, under this evoked memory, the haze of reverie which obscured Flore’s gaze went away; and, again, she saw the dead woman, lit by the yellow flame of the candle. Her mother was no longer, should she then leave, marry Ozil who wanted her, who would make her happy perhaps? His whole being rose up. No no! if she was cowardly enough to let the other two live, and to live on her own, she would have preferred to beat the roads, to praise herself as a servant, rather than to be to a man whom she did not like. And an unusual noise having made her listen, she understood that Misard, with a pickaxe, was searching the beaten floor of the kitchen: he was enraged in search of the loot, he would have gutted the house. Still, she didn’t want to stay with that one either. What was she going to do? A gust blew, the walls shook, and on the white face of the dead, passed a reflection of furnace, bloody the open eyes and the ironic grin of the lips. It was the last omnibus in Paris, with its heavy, slow machine.

Flore had turned her head, looked at the stars which were shining, in the serenity of the spring night.

—Ten past three. Five more hours, and they’ll pass.

She would do it again, she was in too much pain. To see them, to see them thus every week going to love, that was beyond his strength. Now that she was certain that she would never have Jacques on her own, she preferred that he was no more, that there was nothing left. And this dismal room where she watched enveloped her in mourning, under a growing need for the annihilation of everything. Since there was no one left who loved her, the others could well go with her mother. Of dead, there would be more, and more, and we would take them all at once. Her sister was dead, her mother was dead, her love was dead: what to do? to be alone, to stay or to go, alone always, when there were two, the others. No no! let everything crumble sooner than death, which was there, in that smoky room, to blow on the way and sweep the world!

So, decided after this long debate, she discussed the best way to put her project into execution. And she came back to the idea of removing a rail. It was the safest, most practical way of easy execution: just driving out the bearings with a hammer, then popping the rail of the sleepers. She had the tools, no one would see her, in this deserted country. The right place to choose was certainly, after the trench, going towards Barentin, the curve which crossed a valley, on an embankment of seven or eight meters: there, the derailment became certain, the tumble would be appalling. But the calculation of the hours which occupied her next, left her anxious. On the upward track, before the express to Le Havre, which passed at sixteen past eight, there was only an omnibus train at seven fifty-five. So that gave him twenty minutes to do the job, which was enough. However, between the regular trains, trains of unforeseen goods, especially at times of large arrivals. And what an unnecessary risk then! How do we know in advance if it would be the express that would break there? For a long time, she rolled the probabilities in her head. It was still dark, a candle was still burning, drowned in tallow, with a high charred wick, which she no longer blew.

Just as a freight train was arriving from Rouen, Misard came back. His hands were full of earth, having searched the pyre; and he was panting, bewildered by his vain searches, so feverish with powerless rage that he resumed searching under the furniture, in the fireplace, everywhere. The train interminable never ended, with the regular crash of its big wheels, each jolt of which agitated the dead woman in her bed. And he, stretching

out his arm to take down a small picture hanging on the wall, still met the open eyes that followed him, while the lips moved with their laughter.

He turned pale, he shivered, stammering in terrified anger:-

Yes, yes, look! seek! … Go, I will find them, name of God! when I should turn over every stone in the house and every clod in the land!

The black train had passed, crushingly slowly in the darkness, and the dead woman, who had become motionless again, was still looking at her. husband, so mocking, so certain of winning, that he disappeared again, leaving the door open.

Flore, distracted in her thoughts, had stood up. She closed the door, so that this man would not come back to disturb his mother. And she was astonished to hear herself say aloud:

“Ten minutes before, that will be good.”

Indeed, she would have time in ten minutes. If, ten minutes before the express, no train was signaled, she could set to work. From then on, the thing being settled, certain, her anxiety subsided, she was very calm.

About five o’clock the day broke, a fresh dawn, pure limpidity. Despite the bitter cold, she opened the wide window, and the delicious morning entered the dismal room, full of smoke and the smell of death. The sun was still below the horizon, behind a hill crowned with trees; but it appeared, ruddy, streaming down the slopes, inundating the sunken lanes, in the lively gaiety of the earth, with each new spring. She hadn’t been mistaken the day before: it would be fine that morning, one of those days of youth and radiant health, when we love to live. In this deserted country, among the continual hills, cut by narrow valleys, it would be good to go along the goat trails, at your own whim! And, when she turned around, stepping inside the room, she was surprised to see the candle, as if extinguished, no longer stain the broad daylight with a pale tear. The dead woman seemed now to be looking at the track, where the trains continued to cross, without even noticing that pale candle light near this body.

In the daylight only, Flore resumed her service. And she only left the room for the Paris omnibus, at twelve past six. Misard, too, at six o’clock, had just replaced his colleague, the night stationary. It was at his trumpet call that she came to stand in front of the barrier, flag in hand. For a moment, she followed the train with her eyes.

“Two more hours,” she thought out loud.

Her mother didn’t need anyone anymore. Now she felt an invincible reluctance to enter the room. It was over, she had kissed her, she could dispose of her existence and that of others. Usually, between trains, she would escape, disappear; but, that morning, an interest seemed to keep her at her post, near the fence, on a bench, a simple plank which was at the edge of the track. The sun was rising on the horizon, a warm golden shower was falling in the pure air; and she did not move, bathed in this sweetness, in the middle of the vast countryside, all shivering with the sap of April. For a moment she had been interested in Misard, in her plank cabin, at the other end of the line, visibly agitated, out of his usual drowsiness: he went out, came in, maneuvered his devices with a nervous hand, with continual glances towards the house, as if his spirit would have remained there, always to be sought. Then she had forgotten it, not even knowing it there. She was all waiting, absorbed, her face silent and rigid, her eyes fixed at the end of the track, towards Barentin. And over there, in the gaiety of the sun, a vision must have risen for her, in which the stubborn savagery of her gaze was fierce.

The minutes passed. Flore did not move. Finally, when, at seven fifty-five, Misard, Deceived, signaled the omnibus of Havre, on the upward track, she got up, closed the barrier and planted herself in front, the flag in hand. Already, in the distance, the train was getting lost, having shaken the ground; and we heard him rush into the tunnel, where the noise ceased. She had not returned to the bench, she remained standing, counting the minutes again. If in ten minutes no freight train was signaled, she would run over there, past the trench, blow up a rail. She was very calm, her chest only tight, as under the enormous weight of the act. Moreover, at this last moment, the thought that Jacques and Séverine were approaching, that they would pass there again, going to love, if she did not stop them, was enough to stiffen her, blind and deaf, in her resolution, without even the debate starting again in her: it was the irrevocable, the wolf’s paw that breaks the kidneys in passing. She still saw, in the selfishness of her vengeance, only the two mutilated bodies, without worrying about the crowd, the flood of people who had passed before her, for years, unknown. Deaths, blood, the sun would perhaps be hidden, this sun whose tender gaiety irritated her.

Two more minutes, one more, and she was going to leave, she was leaving, when there were dull jolts, on the road to Becourt, stopped him. A

car, a dumpster no doubt. They would ask for passage, he would have to open the barrier, talk, stay there: impossible to act, the coup would be missed. And she made a gesture of enraged carelessness, she took her course, leaving her post, abandoning the car and the driver, who would manage. But a whip cracked in the morning air, a voice shouted cheerfully:

—He! Flora!

It was Cabuche. She was nailed to the ground, stopped at her first impulse, in front of the barrier itself.

—What? he continued, are you still sleeping in this beautiful sun? Quick, that I pass before the express!

In her, a collapse was taking place. The blow was missed, the two others would go to their happiness, without her finding anything to break them there. And as she slowly opened the old, half-rotten gate, the fittings of which creaked in their rust, she searched furiously for an obstacle, something that she could throw in the way, so desperate that she herself would have lay there, if she had fancied herself bones hard enough to blow the machine off the rails. But his eyes had just fallen on the dumpster, the thick, low carriage, loaded with two blocks of stone, which five vigorous horses had difficulty in dragging. Huge, tall and wide, with a giant mass to block the road, these blocks offered themselves to her; and they awakened in his eyes a sudden lust, a mad desire to take them, to put them there. The barrier was wide open, the five sweating, blowing animals were waiting.

—What do you have this morning? resumed Cabuche. You look so funny.

Then Flore spoke:-

My mother died last night.

He gave a cry of painful friendship. Putting down his whip, he squeezed her hands in his.

—Oh! my poor Flore! It was to be expected for a long time, but it is so hard all the same! … So, she is there, I want to see her, because we would have ended up getting along, without the misfortune that has happened.

Slowly, he walked with her to the house. On the threshold, however, he glanced at his horses. With a sentence, she reassured him.

—No danger of them moving! And then, the express is far away.

She was lying. With her trained ear, in the warm thrill of the countryside, she had just heard the express leaving Barentin station.

Another five minutes, and he would be there, he would emerge from the trench, a hundred yards from the level crossing. While the quarryman, standing in front of the dead woman's room, forgot himself, thinking of Louisette, very moved, she, remained outside, in front of the window, continued to listen, in the distance, to the regular breath of the machine. closer. The idea of Misard occurred to him: he had to see her, he would prevent it; and she had a blow to the breast, when, turning round, she did not see him at his post. On the other side of the house, she found him digging in the earth, under the coping of the well, not having been able to resist his madness of research, doubtless seized with the sudden certainty that the loot was there: quite at his passion, blind, deaf, he searched, he searched. And this was the last excitement for her. The things themselves wanted it. One of the horses began to neigh, while the machine, beyond the trench, blew very high, like a person in a hurry running up.

"I'll keep them quiet," said Flore to Cabuche. Don't be afraid.

She sprang forward, took the first horse by the bit, pulled with all her tenfold strength as a wrestler. The horses stiffened; for a moment the dumpster, heavy with its enormous load, swayed without starting; but, as if she had harnessed herself, like a reinforcing animal, he set off, set off on the track. And he was right on the rails when the express, over there, a hundred yards, came out of the trench. Then, to immobilize the hauler, for fear that it might cross, she held back the team, with a sudden jerk, with a superhuman effort, its limbs cracking. She who had her legend, extraordinary features of strength, a wagon launched on a slope, stopped running, a cart pushed, saved from a train, she was doing this thing today, she maintained, with her iron fist, the five horses, rearing and neighing in the instinct of danger.

It was barely ten seconds of endless terror. The two giant stones seemed to block the horizon. With its light brass, its shining steels, the machine slipped, came from its soft and lightning step, under the golden rain of the beautiful morning. The inevitable was there, nothing in the world could prevent the crash. And the wait lasted.

Misard, jumped back to his post, screamed, shaking his fists, in the mad desire to warn and stop the train. Coming out of the house to the noise of the wheels and the neighing, Cabuche had rushed, screaming too, to make the animals advance. But Flore, who had just thrown aside, held him back, which saved him. He believed that she had not had the strength to control

her horses, that it was they who had dragged her. And he accused himself, he sobbed, in a groan of desperate terror; while she, motionless, tall, her eyelids widened and burning, watched. At the very moment when the chest of the machine was about to touch the blocks, when there was perhaps a meter left to go, during this time invaluable, she saw Jacques very clearly, his hand on the shift wheel. He had turned, their eyes met in a look, which she found disproportionately long.

That morning, Jacques had smiled at Séverine when she came down to the quay in Le Havre for the express, as well as every week. What is the use of spoiling your life with nightmares? Why not take advantage of the happy days when they arise? Everything would eventually work out. And he was determined to at least taste the joy of that day, making plans, dreaming of having lunch with her at the restaurant. Also, as she gave him a sorry look, because he didn’t first in mind, and that she was forced to get away from him, at the tail, he had wanted to console her by smiling at her so cheerfully. We would always arrive together, we would make up for it over there, having been separated. Even, after leaning over to see her getting into a compartment, at the very end, he had pushed the good humor to joke the head driver, Henri Dauvergne, whom he knew in love with her. The previous week, he had imagined that this one was emboldened and that she encouraged him, by a need for distraction, wanting to escape the excruciating existence that she had made for herself. Roubaud said it well, she would end up sleeping with this young man, without pleasure, in the sole desire to start something else again. And Jacques had asked Henri for whom, then, the day before, hidden behind one of the elms in the departure courtyard, he was sending kisses in the air; which had made Pecqueux burst out laughing, loading the hearth of the Lison, smoking, ready to leave.

From Havre to Barentin, the express had traveled at its regular speed, without incident; and it was Henry who was the first, from the top of his lookout cabin, coming out of the trenches, to point out the dumpster in the way. The lead van was crowded with luggage, because the train, very loaded, brought a whole arrival of travelers, disembarked the day before from a liner. AT the cramped place, in the midst of this heap of trunks and suitcases, which the trepidation made dance, the chief conductor was standing at his desk, filing sheets; while the little bottle of ink, hanging on a nail, also swung in a continuous motion. After the stations where he left

luggage, he had four or five minutes of paperwork. Two travelers having gone down to Barentin, he had therefore just put his papers in order, when, going up to sit in his lookout, he looked back and forward, as usual, on the track. He remained there, seated in that glass- enclosed gatehouse, all his free hours, under surveillance. The tender him hid the mechanic; but, thanks to his high position, he often saw farther and faster than this one. So the train was still turning in the trench, which he saw the obstacle over there. His surprise was such that he doubted for a moment, bewildered, paralyzed. There were a few lost seconds, the train was already spinning out of the trench, and a loud cry arose from the machine, when he made up his mind to pull the cord of the alarm bell, the end of which hung in front of him.

Jacques, at this supreme moment, his hand on the gear shift wheel, was watching without seeing, in a minute’s absence. He was thinking of confused and distant things, hence the image of Severine herself had fainted. The mad ringing of the bell, the howl of Pecqueux, behind him, woke him. Pecqueux, who had raised the stem of the ashtray, unhappy with the draft, had just seen, leaning over to make sure of the speed. And Jacques, deathly pallor, saw everything, understood everything, the dumpster across, the machine launched, the terrible shock, all with such sharp clarity that he could make out even the grain of the two stones, while he had already the shock of crushing in his bones. It was the inevitable. He had turned the steering wheel violently, closed the governor, applied the brake. He was backing down, he had hung himself, with an unconscious hand, on the whistle button, in the helpless and furious desire to warn, to push aside the giant barricade over there. But, in the midst of this dreadful whistle of distress which tore the air, the Lison did not obey, went all the same, hardly slowed down. She was no longer the docile of yesteryear, since she had lost in the snow her good vaporization, her so easy start, become quinteuse and surly now, like an old woman, whose chest was destroyed by a cold snap. She huffed, reared up under the brake, went, went still, in the stubbornness weighed down by her mass. Pecqueux, mad with fear, jumped up. Jacques, stiffened at his post, right hand clenched on the change of gait, the other remaining at the whistle, without his knowing it, waiting. And the Lison, smoking, blowing, in that shrill roar that did not cease, knocked against the dumpster, with the enormous weight of the thirteen wagons she was dragging.

So, twenty meters from them, from the edge of the track where terror nailed them, Misard and Cabuche, arms in the air, Flore with gaping eyes, saw this frightening thing: the train standing upright, seven wagons going up on top of each other, then fall back with an abominable crackle, in a shapeless debacle of debris. The first three were crumbled, the other four made nothing more than a mountain, a tangle of shattered roofs, broken wheels, doors, chains, buffers, in the midst of pieces of glass. And, above all, we had heard the crushing of the machine against the stones, a dull crushing ending in a cry of agony. The Lison, disembowelled, tumbled to the left, over the dumpster; while the split stones were shattered, as if from a blast, and of the five horses, four, rolled, dragged, were killed outright. The tail of the train, six cars still intact, had stopped, without even getting off the rails.

But cries rose, calls whose words were lost in inarticulate howls of beast.

—To me! help! … Oh! my God! I die! Help! Help!

We no longer heard, we no longer saw. The Lison, thrown back on her back, her stomach open, was losing her vapor, through the torn taps, the burst pipes, in rumbling breaths, like the furious groans of a giantess. A white breath issued from it, inexhaustible, rolling thick whirlpools at ground level; while, from the hearth, the fallen embers, red as the very blood of his entrails, added their black smoke. The fireplace, in the violence of the shock, had sunk into the ground; to the place where he had brought, the chassis was broken, distorting the two spars; and, wheels in the air, like a monstrous cavalry, disjointed by some formidable blow of the horn, the Lison showed its crooked rods, its broken cylinders, its drawers and their crushed eccentrics, a whole hideous wound yawning in the open air, through which the soul continued to come out, with a crash of enraged despair. In fact, near her, the horse, which was not dead, was also lying, the two front feet carried away, also losing its entrails by a tear in its belly. On his right head, stiffened in a spasm of excruciating pain, he could be seen moaning, with a terrible neigh, nothing of which reached his ear, in the midst of the thunder. of the dying machine.

The cries were choked, unheard, lost, gone.

—Save me! kill me! … I suffer too much, kill me! kill me then!

In this deafening tumult, this blinding smoke, the doors of the cars which had remained intact had just opened, and a rout of travelers rushed outside. They fell on the track, picked themselves up, struggled with kicks, punches. Then, as soon as they felt the solid earth, the open countryside in front of them, they ran away at a gallop, jumped over the hedge, cut across the fields, yielding to the unique instinct of being far from danger, far, very far. Women, screaming men got lost in the woods.

Trampled, her hair undone and her dress in tatters, Séverine had finally freed herself; and she was not running away, she was galloping towards the rumbling machine, when she found herself in front of Pecqueux.

—Jacques, Jacques! he's saved, isn't he?

The driver, who, by a miracle, had not even sprained a limb, also came running, his heart aching with remorse, at the idea that his mechanic was under there. We had traveled so much, toiled so much together, under the continual fatigue of the high winds! And their machine, their poor machine, the good friend so beloved of their threesome, who was there on his back, give back all the breath of his chest, by his punctured lungs!

"I jumped," he stammered, "I don't know anything, nothing at all… Let's run, let's run fast!"

On the quay, they bumped into Flore, who watched them coming. She had not moved yet, in the amazement of the act accomplished, of this massacre she had done. It was over, it was good; and there was in her only the relief of a need, without a pity for the ills of others, which she did not even see. But, when she recognized Séverine, her eyes widened disproportionately, a shadow of terrible suffering blackened her pale face. And what? she lived, this woman, when he was certainly dead! In this sharp pain of her murdered love, this stab which she had given herself in the heart, she was suddenly aware of the abomination of his cry to me. She had done that, she had killed him, she had killed everyone! A loud cry tore her throat, she twisted her arms, she ran madly.

—Jacques, oh! Jacques… He is there, he was thrown backwards, I saw him… Jacques, Jacques!

La Lison was moaning less loudly, with a hoarse moan that was weakening, and in which, now, one could hear the clamor of the wounded growing more and more heartbreaking. Only, the smoke remained thick, the enormous pile of debris from which these voices of torture and terror

issued, seemed enveloped in black dust, motionless in the sun. What to do? by where to start? how to get to these unfortunate people?

—Jacques! Flore still cried. I tell you that he looked at me and that he was thrown over there, under the tender… Hurry up ! help me then!

Cabuche and Misard had already relieved Henri, the chief conductor, who, at the last second, had also jumped. He had given his footing, they sat him down on the ground, against the hedge, from where, dazed, silent, he looked at the rescue, without appearing to suffer.

—Cabuche, come help me, I tell you that Jacques is down there!

The quarryman did not hear, ran to other wounded, carried off a young woman whose legs were hanging down, broken at her thighs.

And it was Séverine who rushed forward, at Flore's call.

—Jacques, Jacques! … Where then? I will help you.

—That's it, help me, you!

Their hands met, they pulled together on a broken wheel. But the delicate fingers of one came nowhere, while the other, with his strong grip, knocked down obstacles.

—Warning! said Pecqueux, who was also setting to work.

With a sudden movement, he had stopped Séverine, when she was going to walk on one arm, cut off at the shoulder, still wearing a blue cloth sleeve. She recoiled in horror. However, she did not recognize the sleeve: it was an unknown arm, rolled up there, of a body that one would undoubtedly find elsewhere. And she remained so trembling that she was as if paralyzed, weeping and standing, watching the others at work, unable even to remove the shards of glass, where the hands were cut.

So the rescue of the dying, the search for the dead were full of anguish and danger, for the fire of the machine had communicated itself to pieces of wood, and it was necessary to extinguish this start of fire, shovel earth. While they were running to Barentin to ask for help, and a dispatch was leaving for Rouen, the clearing was organized as actively as possible, all the hands put in, with great courage. Many of the fugitives had returned, ashamed of their panic. But we advanced with infinite precautions, each debris to be removed required care, because we feared to finish off the unfortunate buried, if landslides occurred. The wounded emerged from the heap, engaged up to the chest, clamped there as in a vice, and screaming. We worked a quarter of an hour to deliver one, who did not complain, from

a pallor of laundry, saying that he had nothing, that he suffered from nothing; and, when they had taken him out, he had no more legs, he immediately expired, without having known or felt this horrible mutilation, in the seizure of his fear. A whole family was taken out of a second-hand car, where the fire had started: the father and mother were wounded in the knees, the grandmother had a broken arm; but they didn't feel their pain either, sobbing, calling their little girl, who had disappeared in the crash, a fair-haired girl of barely three years old, who was found under a shred of roof, safe and sound, with an amused and smiling face. Another girl, covered in blood, this one, her poor little hands crushed, which had been carried aside, while waiting to discover her parents, remained solitary and unknown, so stifled that she did not say a word, her face only convulsed in a mask of indescribable terror, as soon as 'we approached him. You could not open the doors, the shock of which had twisted the fittings, you had to go down into the compartments through the broken windows. Four corpses were already lined up side by side, at the edge of the track. About ten wounded, lying on the ground near the dead, were waiting, without a doctor to dress them, without help. And the clearing was just beginning, we picked up a new victim under each rubble, the heap did not seemed not to diminish, all dripping and pulsating from this human butchery.

"When I tell you that Jacques is down there!" Flore repeated, relieving herself at this obstinate cry she uttered without reason, like the very complaint of her despair. He calls, hold on, hold on! Listen!

The tender was engaged under the wagons, which, mounted one above the other, had then collapsed on top of it; and, in fact, since the machine was moaning less loudly, a loud man's voice was heard roaring at the bottom of the landslide. As we advanced, the clamor of that agonizing voice grew louder, with a pain so enormous, that the workers could not no longer bear it, crying and screaming themselves. Then, finally, as they were holding the man, whose legs they had just released and which they were pulling towards them, the roar of suffering ceased. The man was dead.

—No, said Flore, it's not him. It's more at the bottom, it's below.

And, with her warrior's arms, she lifted wheels, threw them away, she twisted the zinc on the roofs, smashed doors, tore pieces of chain. And, as soon as she came across a dead or wounded person, she called for them to get rid of him, not wanting to let go of her rabid excavations for a second.

Behind her, Cabuche, Pecqueux, Misard were working, while that Severine, failing to remain standing like this, without being able to do anything, had just sat down on the battered seat of a train car. But Misard, regained his composure, gentle and indifferent, avoided serious fatigue, especially helping to transport bodies. And he, as well as Flore, looked at the corpses, as if they hoped to recognize them, in the midst of the crowd of thousands and thousands of faces, which, in ten years, had paraded before them, at full steam, in leaving only the confused memory of a crowd, brought, carried away in a flash. No! it was still only the unknown tide of the moving world; brutal, accidental death remained anonymous, like life in a hurry, whose gallop passed there, going to the future; and they could not put any name, any precise information, on the heads plowed by the horror of these wretches, fallen on the road, trampled, crushed, like these soldiers whose bodies fill the holes, before the charge of an army rising to the assault. However, Flore thought she had found one to whom she had spoken, the day of the train lost in the snow: this American, whose profile she ended up knowing familiarly, without knowing either his name, or anything about him or his family. Misard carried him with the other dead, who had come from no one knew where, stopped there on their way to no one knew where.

Then there was another heartbreaking spectacle. In the overturned case of a first-class compartment, we had just discovered a young couple, the newlyweds, no doubt, thrown against each other, so unfortunately that the woman, under her, crushed the man without her being able to make a movement to relieve him. He was choking, already moaning; while she, with her mouth free, begged desperately to hurry, terrified, heart torn, to feel that she was killing him. And, when they had both been delivered, it was she who, all of a sudden, gave up the ghost, her side pierced by a tampon. And the man, coming to himself, cried out in pain, kneeling beside her, remained full of tears.

Now there were twelve dead, over thirty injured. But we managed to free the tender; and Flore, from time to time, stopped, plunged her head among the splintered woods, the twisted chains, ardently searching her eyes, to see if she did not see the mechanic. Suddenly she gave a loud cry.

—I see him, he’s down there… Here! it’s his arm, with his blue woolen jacket… And he doesn’t move, he does n’t breathe…

She was straightened up, she swore like a man.

—But, for God’s sake! so hurry up, get him out of there!

With both hands she tried to tear off a car floor, that other debris prevented him from firing at her. So she ran, she came back with the ax that was used by the Misards to chop wood; and brandishing it, like a woodcutter brandishing his ax in the midst of a forest of oaks, she attacked the floor with a furious flight. We had moved away, we let her do it, shouting to her to be careful. But there was no other wounded but the mechanic, himself sheltered under a tangle of axles and wheels. Besides, she was not listening, lifted in a rush, sure of himself, irresistible. She was chopping wood, each of her blows cut an obstacle. With her blonde hair gone, her bare arms, she was like a terrible grim reaper opening a gap in the destruction she had made. A final blow, which struck an axle, broke the blade of the ax in two. And, helped by the others, she pushed aside the wheels which had protected the young man from certain crushing, she was the first to seize him, to carry him in her arms.

—Jacques, Jacques! … He breathes, he lives. Ah! my God, he saw… I knew very well that I had seen him fall and that he was there!

Severine, distraught, followed her. Together, they placed him at the foot of the hedge, near Henri, who, amazed, was still watching, without seeming to understand where he was or what was around him. Pecqueux, who had approached, remained standing in front of his mechanic, upset to see him in such a mess; while the two women, kneeling now, one on the right, the other on the left, supported the head of the unfortunate man, watching with anguish the slightest shiver in his face.

Finally, Jacques opened his eyelids. His troubled eyes fell on them in turn, without appearing to recognize them. They didn’t matter to him. But his eyes, having met the expiring machine a few yards away, were at first startled, then fixed, flickering with growing emotion. She, the Lison, he recognized her well, and she reminded her of everything, the two stones in the way, the abominable shock, that crushing that he had felt both in her and in him, from which he was resuscitating, while she, surely, was going to die of it. She was not guilty of having been reluctant; for, since her illness contracted in the snow, it was not her fault that she was less alert; not to mention that age is coming, which weighs down the limbs and hardens the joints. So he willingly forgave her, overwhelmed with great grief, to see her

wounded to death, in agony. Poor Lison had only a few minutes left. She was cooling, the embers of her hearth were turning to ashes, the the breath which had escaped so violently from its open flanks ended in a little cry of a crying child. Soiled with earth and slime, she always so shiny, sprawled on her back in a black pool of coal, she had the tragic end of a luxury animal that an accident struck down in the middle of the street. For a moment, we could see, through his punctured entrails, his organs functioning, the pistons beating like two twin hearts, the steam circulating in the drawers like the blood of his veins; but, like convulsing arms, the connecting rods had nothing but thrills, the last revolts of life; and her soul was going with the strength that made her alive, this immense breath of which she could not manage to empty all. The disembowelled giant calmed down again, gradually fell asleep in a very gentle sleep, and finally fell silent. She was dead. And the heap of iron, steel and copper, which she left there, this crushed colossus, with its split trunk, its scattered limbs, its bruised organs, brought to light, took on the dreadful sadness of a corpse human, enormous, of a whole world that had lived and from which life had just been torn away, in pain.

Then Jacques, having understood that the Lison was no more, closed his eyes again with the desire to die too, so weak, moreover, that machine; and, from her closed eyelids, slow tears were now flowing, flooding her cheeks. It was too much for Pecqueux, who had remained there, motionless, his throat tight. Their good friend was dying, and now her mechanic wanted to follow her. Was it over with their threesome? Gone are the trips, where, mounted on his back, they traveled a hundred leagues, without exchanging a word, all three getting along so well all the same, that they did not need to make a sign to understand each other! Ah! poor Lison, so gentle in her strength, so beautiful when she shone in the sun! And Pecqueux, who had not yet drunk, burst into violent sobs, the gasps of which shook his large body, without being able to hold them back.

Séverine and Flore, too, were in despair, worried about Jacques’s new fainting. The last one ran home, came back with camphorated brandy, began to rub it, to do something. But the two women, in their anguish, were still exasperated by the interminable agony of the horse which, only of the five, survived, both front feet carried away. He was lying next to them, he had a continuous whinny, an almost human cry, so resounding and of such terrible

pain, that two of the wounded, overcome by the contagion, had started to howl too, as well as beasts. Never had a cry of death torn the air with that deep, unforgettable moan that chilled blood. The torture was becoming atrocious, voices trembling with pity and anger were carried away, begging to be killed, this miserable horse which suffered so much, and whose endless groan, now that the machine was dead, remained like lamentation last of the disaster. Then Pecqueux, still sobbing, picked up the broken-iron ax, then, with a single blow to the head, brought it down. And, on the massacre field, silence fell.

Help finally arrived, after two hours of waiting. In the shock of the encounter, the cars had all been launched on the left, so that the clearing of the downward track could be done in a few hours. A train of three wagons, driven by a pilot machine, had just brought from Rouen the chief of staff of the prefect, the imperial prosecutor, engineers and doctors of the Company, a whole flood of frightened and eager characters; while the station master of Barentin, M. Bessière, was already there, with a team, attacking the debris. An extraordinary agitation, nervousness reigned in this remote corner of the country, so deserted and usually so silent. The safe and sound travelers kept, from the frenzy of their panic, a feverish need for movement: some were looking for cars, terrified of getting back into the wagon; the others, seeing that not even a wheelbarrow would be found, were already worried about where they would eat, where they would sleep; and all demanded a telegraph office, several left on foot for Barentin, carrying dispatches. While the authorities, aided by the administration, began an investigation, the doctors hastily bandaged the wounded. Many had passed out in the midst of pools of blood. Others, under pliers and needles, complained in a weak voice. There were, in sum, fifteen dead and thirty-two travelers seriously injured. While waiting for their identity could be established, the dead had remained on the ground, ranged along the hedge, their faces in the sky. Only a little substitute, a young man, blond and pink, who was zealous, looked after them, searched their pockets, to see if papers, cards, letters, would not allow him to label them each one. ’a name and an address. However, around him a yawning circle formed; for, although there was no house, for nearly a league around, curious people had arrived, no one knew from where, about thirty men, women, children, who annoyed, without helping anything. And, the black dust, the veil of smoke and vapor that

enveloped everything, having dissipated, April triumphed over the massacre field, bathing in the soft and cheerful rain of its clear sun the dying and the dead, the Lison gutted, the disaster of the piled up rubble, which the team of workers was clearing, like insects repairing the devastation of a kick given by a distracted passer-by in their anthill.

Jacques was still unconscious, and Séverine had stopped a doctor in passing, begging. The latter had just examined the young man, without finding any apparent injury to him; but he feared internal lesions, for thin streaks of blood appeared on the lips. Not being able to say yet, he advised to take the injured as soon as possible and put him in a bed, avoiding jerks.

Under the palpating hands, Jacques had opened his eyes again, with a slight cry of pain; and this time he recognized Séverine, he stammered in his bewilderment:-

Take me away, take me away!

Flore had leaned over. But, having turned his head, he recognized her too. His looks expressed a child’s terror, he threw himself back towards Séverine, in a retreat of hatred and horror.

—Take me away, right away, right away!

So she asked him, on the same terms, alone with him, because this girl no longer counted:

“At the Croix-de-Maufras, will you? … If that doesn’t upset you, it’s over there, we’ll be at home.”

And he agreed, still shaking, his eyes on the other.

—Where you want, right away!

Motionless, Flore had turned pale, under that look of terrified execration. Thus, in this carnage of strangers and innocent people, she had not managed to kill either of them: the woman came out without a scratch; he, now, would perhaps escape; and in this way she had only succeeded in bringing them together, in throwing them together, one by one, at the end of this solitary house. She saw them settled there, the lover cured, convalescing, the mistress taking care of them, by continual caresses, both extending far from the world, in absolute freedom, this honeymoon of disaster. A great cold froze her, she looked at the dead, she had killed for nothing.

At that moment, in this glance taken at the slaughter, Flore saw Misard and Cabuche, whom the gentlemen were questioning, justice for sure.

Indeed, the imperial prosecutor and the head of the prefect's cabinet were trying to understand how this quarryman's car had thus been found in the way. Misard maintained that he had not left his post, although he could not give any precise information: he really did not know anything, he pretended he was turning his back, busy with his devices. As for Cabuche, still upset, he told a long and confused story, why he had made the mistake of letting go of his horses, eager to see the dead woman, and how the horses had left on their own, and how the young girl had failed. could stop them. He got confused, started again, without being able to make himself understood.

A savage need for freedom made Flore's icy blood beat again. She wanted to be free of herself, free to think and take sides, never needing anyone to be on the right path. What good is waiting that they bore him with questions, that they perhaps stopped him? Because, apart from the crime, there had been a fault of service, one would make it responsible. However, she remained, held there, as long as Jacques was there himself.

Séverine had just prayed to Pecqueux so much that he had finally obtained a stretcher; and he reappeared with a comrade, to take away the wounded. The doctor had also decided the young woman to accept in her the head driver, Henri, who seemed to suffer only from a concussion in the brain, dazed. We would transport him after another.

And, as Séverine leaned down to unbutton Jacques' collar, which bothered him, she kissed him on the eyes, openly, wanting to give him the courage to endure the transport.

—Do not be afraid, we will be happy.

Smiling, he kissed her in turn. And it was, for Flore, the supreme heartbreak, what tore her away from him, forever. It seemed to her that her blood, too, was flowing now, from an incurable wound. When it was carried off, she fled. But, passing in front of the low house, she saw, through the panes of the window, the death chamber, with the pale stain of the candle which was burning in the broad daylight, near her mother's body. During the accident, the dead woman was left alone, her head half turned, her eyes wide open, her lip twisted, as if she had watched all the people she didn't know crush and die.

Flore galloped, turned immediately on the bend in the road to Doinville, then started to the left, among the undergrowth. She knew every corner of the country, so she dared the gendarmes to take her, if they were launched

in pursuit. So she suddenly stopped running, continuing with small steps, going to a hiding place where she liked to hide in her sad days, an excavation above the tunnel. She looked up, saw in the sun that it was noon. When she was in her hole, she lay down on the hard rock, she stayed motionless, hands tied behind the back of the neck, thinking. Only then did a dreadful emptiness appear in her, the feeling of having already died gradually numbing her limbs. It was not remorse for killing everyone unnecessarily, for she had to make an effort to regain the regret and the horror. But, she was sure now, Jacques had seen her holding back the horses; and she had just understood him, when she recoiled, he had for her the terrified repulsion one has for monsters. He would never forget. Moreover, when you miss people, you must not miss yourself. Soon she would kill herself. She had no another hope, she felt more the absolute necessity, since she had been there, to calm down and to reason. Fatigue, the annihilation of her whole being, alone prevented her from getting up to look for a weapon and die. And yet the bottom of the invincible drowsiness that took her, still rode the love of life, the need of happiness, a dream last to be happy too, since it allowed the other two to their happiness of live together, free. Why didn’t she wait for night and run to join Ozil, who adored her, who would know how to defend her? Her thoughts became soft and confused, she fell asleep, a dark sleep, without dreams.

When Flore woke up, the night had fallen, deep. Dazed, she felt around her, suddenly remembered, feeling the bare rock where she was lying. And it was, as with the shock of lightning, the implacable necessity: one had to die. It seemed that cowardly gentleness, this weakness in the face of still possible life, had gone with fatigue. No no! the only death was good. She couldn’t live in all this blood, her heart torn out, hated by the one man she had wanted and who belonged to another. Now that she had the strength, she had to die.

Flore got up and came out of the hole in the rocks. She did not hesitate, because she had just instinctively found where she should go. With a new look at the sky, towards the stars, she knew it was nearly nine o’clock. As she reached the railway line, a train passed, at high speed, on the downward track, which seemed to please her: everything would be fine, this track had obviously been cleared, while the other was probably still obstructed, because circulation did not seem to be restored. From then on, she followed

the hedge, in the midst of the great silence of this wild country. There was no rush, there would be no more train before the Paris express, which would not be there until nine twenty-five; and she always walked along the small hedge not, in the thick shade, very calm, as if she had taken one of her usual walks, along deserted paths. However, before arriving at the tunnel, she crossed the hedge, she continued to advance on the same track, with her stroll, walking to meet the express. She had to be cunning, so as not to be seen by the keeper, as she usually did, whenever she visited Ozil over there on the other end. And, in the tunnel, she walked again, always, always forward. But it wasn't like the other week, she wasn't afraid, if she turned around, of losing the exact notion of where she was going. not under his head, that stroke of madness into which things, time and space sink, in the midst of the thunder of noise and the crushing of the vault. What did it matter to him! she did not reason, did not even think, had only one fixed resolution: to walk, to walk in front of her, as long as she did not meet the train, and to walk again, straight to the lantern, as soon as she saw it blaze in the night.

Flore was surprised, however, for she had thought she had been going like this for hours. How far away was this death she wanted! The idea that she wouldn't find her, that she would walk leagues and leagues without colliding against her, despaired her for a moment. Her feet were getting tired, would she have to sit down, wait for him, lying across the rails? But it seemed unworthy to her, she needed to walk to the end, to die straight, from the instinct of a virgin and a warrior. And it was, in her, an awakening of energy, a new push forward, when she saw, very far away, the beacon of the express, like a small star, sparkling and unique at the bottom of a dark sky ink. The train was not yet under the arch, no sound announced it, there was only this fire so lively, so gay, growing little by little. Straightened up in her tall supple statue-like waist, swayed on her strong legs, she was now advancing with a long step, without running, however, as at the approach of a friend, whom she wanted to spare part of the way. But the train had just entered the tunnel, the dreadful rumble approached, shaking the earth with a stormy blast, while the star had become a huge eye, ever growing, springing like from the orbit of darkness. Then, under the influence of an unexplained feeling, perhaps for being only one to die, she emptied her pockets, without ceasing her heroic obstinate walk, put a whole package on the side of the

road, a handkerchief, keys, string, two knives; even she took off the scarf tied on her neck, left her bodice unfastened, half ripped. The eye changed into an inferno, into the mouth of an oven vomiting the fire, the breath of the monster came, damp and hot already, in this rolling thunder, more and more deafening. And she was still walking, she was heading straight for this furnace, so as not to miss the machine, fascinated as a night insect, which a flame attracts. And, in the terrible shock, in the embrace, she straightened up again, as if, stirred up by a last rebellion of a wrestler, she had wanted to embrace the colossus and defeat him. His head had worn right in the lantern, which went out.

It was not until more than an hour later that Corpse of Flore. The mechanic had clearly seen that tall, pale face walking against the machine, of a frightful strangeness in appearance, under the jet of vivid light which flooded him; and when, suddenly, the lantern extinguished, the train had found itself in the deep darkness, rolling with its thunderous noise, it had shuddered, at the feeling of death passing by. Coming out of the tunnel, he had tried to shout the accident at the guard. But only Barentin had he been able to relate that someone had just been cut over there: it was certainly a woman; of hair, mixed with skull debris were still bonded to the broken glass of the lantern. And, when the men sent to the search of the body discovered it, they were struck to see it so white, of a marble whiteness. He was lying on the upward path, thrown there by the violence of the shock, his head mushy, his limbs scratchless, half-naked, admirably beautiful, in purity and strength. Silently, the men enveloped him. They had recognized her. She had surely been killed, mad, to escape the terrible responsibility that weighed on her.

From midnight, Flore’s corpse, in the small low house, rested next to her mother’s corpse. They had put a mattress on the floor and relit a candle between them. Phasia, the head still bowed, with the dreadful laugh of his twisted mouth, seemed now to be looking at his daughter, with his large fixed eyes; while, in the solitude, in the midst of the profound silence, one heard on all sides the secret work, the panting effort of Misard, who had resumed his excavations. And, at the regular intervals, the trains passed, crossed on the two tracks, the circulation having just been completely restored. They passed, inexorable, with their mechanical omnipotence, indifferent, ignorant of these tragedies and these crimes. What did the

strangers to the crowd who had fallen on the road and crushed under the wheels matter? We had taken the dead, washed the blood, and we were leaving for there in the future.

XI

It was in the large bedroom of the Croix-de-Maufras, the bedroom hung with red damask, the two tall windows of which looked out on the railway line, a few yards away. From the bed, an old four-poster bed, placed opposite, we could see the trains passing by. And, for years, we had not removed an object, not disturbed a piece of furniture.

Séverine had made Jacques, wounded, unconscious, come up to this room; while Henri Dauvergne was left on the ground floor, in another, smaller bedroom. She kept for herself a room next to Jacques', from which the landing alone separated her. In two hours, the installation was sufficiently comfortable, because the house had remained completely mounted, there was even linen at the back of the cupboards. An apron tied over her dress, Séverine found herself changed into a nurse, after having simply telegraphed to Roubaud that he did not have to wait for her, that she would undoubtedly stay there for a few days, to take care of the wounded. at their home.

And, the next day, the doctor thought he could answer for Jacques, even in a week he counted on getting him back on his feet: a real miracle, hardly any slight internal disorders. But he recommended the greatest care, the most immobility absolute. So, when the patient opened her eyes, Séverine, who watched over him like a child, begged him to be kind, to obey her in everything. He, still very weak, nodded. He had all his lucidity, he recognized this room, described by her, the night of her confession: the red room, where, from the age of sixteen and a half, she had yielded to the violence of President Grandmorin. It was the bed he now occupied, it was the windows through which, without even raising his head, he watched the trains go by, amid the sudden shaking of the whole house. And, this house, he felt it around him, as he had seen it so often, when he himself passed there, carried away on his machine. He saw her again, planted sideways at the edge of the track, in her distress and in the abandonment of her closed shutters, made, since she was for sale, more lamentable and more

suspicious by the immense sign, which added to the melancholy of the garden, clogged with brambles. He remembered the awful sadness he felt each time, the uneasiness with which she haunted him, as if she was standing in this place for the misfortune of his existence. Today, lying in this room, so weak, he thought he understood, because it could only be that: he was surely going to die there.

As soon as she saw him able to hear him, Séverine had eager to reassure him, whispering in his ear as she pulled up the blanket:-

Don’t worry, I emptied your pockets, I took the watch.

He was looking at her, eyes widened, straining to remember.

—The watch… Ah! yes, the watch.

—We could have searched you. And I hid it among my belongings. Do not be afraid.

He thanked her with a shake of the hand. Turning his head, he saw the knife on the table, also found in one of his pockets. He alone was not to hide: a knife like all the others.

But, the next day, Jacques was stronger, and he recovered. to hope he wouldn’t die there. He had had real pleasure in recognizing Cabuche near him, hastening, deafening his colossal heavy steps on the floor; because, since the accident, the quarryman had not left Séverine, as if carried away by an ardent need for devotion: he gave up his work, came back every morning to help her with the heavy housework, served her like a faithful dog, eyes fixed on hers. As he said, she was a rough woman, despite her thin appearance. There was something we could do for her, who did so much for others. And the two lovers got used to him, made friends with each other, even kissed, without embarrassment, when he crossed the room discreetly, erasing as much as possible his large body.

Jacques, however, was surprised by Severine’s frequent absences. The first day, in order to obey the doctor, she had hidden Henri’s presence downstairs from him, realizing how soothing sweetness the idea of absolute solitude would be.

—We are alone, aren’t we?

—Yes, my darling, alone, quite alone… Sleep peacefully.

Only, she disappeared every minute, and the next day he had heard footsteps and whispers on the ground floor. Then the next day there was all

muffled mirth, clear laughter, two young and fresh voices which did not cease.

—What is it? who is it? … So we are not alone?

—Well! no, my darling, there is downstairs, just under your room, another wounded man I must have taken in.

—Ah! … Who then?

—Henri, you know, the head conductor?

—Henri… Ah!

—And this morning her sisters arrived. It is they whom you hear, they laugh at everything… As he is much better, they will leave this evening, because of their father who cannot do without them; and Henri will stay two or three days more, to recover completely… Imagine, he jumped, and nothing broke; only he was like an idiot; but it came back.

Jacques was silent, fixed on her such a long look that she added:

“Do you understand?” if he wasn’t there, we could talk about us both… As long as I’m not alone with you, my husband has nothing to say, I have a good excuse to stay here… You understand?

—Yes, yes, it is very good.

And, until evening, Jacques listened to the laughter of the little Dauvergne girls, whom he remembered having heard, in Paris, come up like this from the lower floor, into the room where Séverine had confessed, in his arms. Then, peace was made, he could distinguish only the light step of the latter, going from him to the other wounded. The door below was closing, deep silence. Twice, being very thirsty, he had to bang a chair on the floor to get her up. And, when she reappeared, she was smiling, very eager, explaining that she was never ending, because it was necessary to maintain compresses of ice water on Henri’s head.

On the fourth day, Jacques was able to get up and spend two hours in an armchair in front of the window. Leaning over a little, he saw the narrow garden, which the railroad had cut, enclosed by a low wall, invaded by rosehips with pale flowers. And he remembered the night when he stood up, to look over the wall, he saw again the rather vast ground, of the other next to the house, closed only with a living hedge, that hedge he had crossed, and behind which he had bumped into Flore, sitting at the threshold of the small ruined greenhouse, untangling stolen ropes, with scissors. Ah! the abominable night, full of the terror of his illness! This Flora, with her tall

and supple figure of a blonde warrior, her flaming eyes, fixed straight on hers, obsessed her, ever since the memory came back to her more and more clearly. First, he hadn’t opened his mouth about the accident, and no one around him was talking about it, out of caution. But every detail woke up, he rebuilt everything, he thought only of that, of continuous, that now, at the window, his sole occupation was to seek traces, to watch for the actors of the catastrophe. Why then did he no longer see her at her gatekeeper post, flag in hand? He did not dare to ask the question, it worsened the uneasiness caused by this dismal house, which seemed to him entirely populated by specters.

One morning, however, as Cabuche was there, helping Séverine, he finally made up his mind.

—And Flore, is she ill?

The quarryman, seized, did not understand a gesture of the young woman, thought she was ordering him to speak.

—Poor Flore, she’s dead!

Jacques looked at them, shuddering, and he had to tell all. Between them, they told him the suicide of the young girl, how she had been cut, under the tunnel. The mother’s funeral had been delayed until evening, to take the daughter away at the same time; and they slept side by side, in the little cemetery of Doinville, where they had gone to join the first part, the youngest, that sweet and unhappy Louisette, also carried away violently, all soiled with blood and mud. Three wretches, of those who fall on the way and are crushed, disappeared, as if swept away by the terrible wind of these passing trains!

—Dead, my God! repeated Jacques, very low, my poor aunt Phasie, and Flore, and Louisette!

On behalf of the latter, Cabuche, who was helping Séverine push the bed, instinctively raised his eyes to her, troubled by the memory of her former tenderness, in the growing passion with which he was invaded, helpless, being tender and stubborn, like a good dog who gives himself from the first caress. But the young woman, aware of his tragic loves, remained serious, looked at him with eyes of sympathy; and he was very touched; and, his hand having unwittingly brushed his as he passed him the pillows, he choked, he answered in a stammering voice to Jacques, who was questioning him.

“So he was accused of having caused the accident?”

—Oh! no, no… Only, it was his fault, you understand.

In broken sentences, he said what he knew. He had seen nothing, for he was in the house, when the horses had walked, bringing the dumpster across the way. That was his muffled remorse, these gentlemen of justice had reproached him harshly: no one left his animals, the frightful misfortune would not have happened if he had stayed with them. The investigation had therefore resulted in simple negligence on the part of Flore; and, as she had punished herself, excruciatingly, the matter ended there, they did not even move Misard, who, with his humble and deferential air, had escaped from charging the dead woman: she never did what she wanted, he had to leave his post every minute to close the barrier. Moreover, the Company had only been able to establish, that morning, the perfect correction of its service; and, while waiting for him to remarry, she had just authorized him to take with him, to guard the barrier, an old woman from the neighborhood, La Ducloux, a former servant of an inn, who lived on shady earnings, previously collected.

When Cabuche left the room, Jacques looked back at Séverine. He was very pale.

—You know very well that it was Flore who pulled the horses, and who blocked the way, with the stones.

Séverine turns pale in her turn.

—Honey, what are you talking about! … You have a fever, you must go back to bed.

—No, no, it’s not a nightmare… You hear? I saw her, as I see you. She held the animals, she prevented the dumpster from advancing, with her strong grip.

Then, the young woman fainted on a chair in front of him, her legs broken.

—My God! my God! It scares me… It’s monstrous, I’m not going to sleep anymore.

—Of course! He continued, the thing is clear, she tried to kill us both, in the heap… She had wanted me for a long time, and she was jealous. With that, a crazy head, ideas from the other world… So many murders at once, all a crowd in blood! Ah! the bougresse!

Her eyes widened, a nervous twitch pulled her lips; and he was silent, and they kept looking at each other for a whole minute. Then, tearing himself away from the abominable visions which evoked between them, he continued in a low voice: “Ah!” she’s dead, so that’s what she’s coming back to! Since I regained consciousness, it always seems to me that she is there. This morning again, I turned around, believing her at the bedside of my bed… She is dead, and we live. I hope she doesn’t take revenge now!

Severine shuddered.

—Shut up, shut up! You will drive me crazy.

And she went out, Jacques the injured. He, who remained at the window, forgot himself again to examine the way, the little house of the gatekeeper, with its large well, the cantonment post, that narrow plank hut, where Misard seemed to doze, in his regular and monotonous work. These things absorbed him now for hours, as if in search of a problem he could not solve, and the solution of which nevertheless mattered to his salvation.

This Misard, he never tired of looking at him, this puny creature, soft and pale, continually shaken by a little bad cough, and who had poisoned his wife, and who had come to the end of this fellow, like a rodent insect, stubborn to his passion. Surely, for years, he had had no other idea in his head, day or night, during the twelve interminable hours of his service. At each electric tinkle announcing a train, sound the horn; then, when the train has passed, the track closed, push a button to announce it to the next station, push another to clear the way at the previous station: these were simply mechanical movements, which had ended up entering like habits of the body in its vegetative life. Illiterate, obtuse, he never read, his hands dangling, his eyes lost and vague, between the calls of his devices. Almost always seated in his sentry box, there took no other distraction than having lunch there as long as possible. Then he fell back to his stupor, his skull empty, without a thought, tormented above all by terrible drowsiness, sometimes falling asleep with his eyes open. At night, if he did not want to succumb to this irresistible torpor, he had to get up, walk with limp legs, like a drunken man. And it was thus that the struggle with his wife, that deaf struggle for the thousand hidden francs, to whom they would have them after the death of the other, must have been, for months and months, the only reflection, in that numb brain of a lonely man. When he sounded his trunk, when he manipulated his signals, watching as an automaton to the

safety of so many lives, he thought of poison; and, when he waited, his arms inert, his eyes flickering with sleep, he still thought of it. Nothing beyond: he would kill her, he would seek, it was he who would have the money.

Today, Jacques was surprised to find him the same. So we killed without a shock, and life went on. After the fever of the first excavations, Misard, in fact, had just fallen back to his composure, with a sneaky softness of being fragile that fears shocks. Basically he had eaten it in vain, his wife was triumphing all the same; for he was still beaten, he returned the house without discovering anything, not a penny; and his looks alone, looks restless and prying, said his preoccupation, in his earthy face. Continually, he saw the dead woman's wide open eyes, the dreadful laughter of her lips, which repeated: "Seek! seek!" He was searching, now he could not give his brain a minute's rest; relentlessly, she worked, worked, in search of the place where the loot was buried, resuming the examination of possible hiding places, rejecting those he had already searched, igniting fever as soon as he imagined a new one, then burned with such haste that he let go of everything to run there, uselessly: intolerable torture in the long run, vengeful torture, a sort of cerebral insomnia which lay awake, stupid and unwillingly thinking, under the ticking clock of the fixed idea. When he blew on his trunk, once for descending trains, twice for ascending trains, he was looking; when he obeyed the bells, when he pushed the buttons of his devices, closing, opening the way, he searched; ceaselessly, he searched, searched desperately, during the day, during his long waits, weighed down with idleness, at night, tormented by sleep, like an exile at the end of the world, in the silence of the great black countryside. And La Ducloux, the woman who now guarded the barrier, worked with the desire to be married, was very caring, worried about what he never closed his eye again.

One night, Jacques, who was beginning to take a few steps in his room, got up and approached the window, saw a lantern coming and going at Misard's: surely the man was looking. But, the following night, as the convalescent was watching again, he was surprised to recognize Cabuche, in a large dark form, standing on the road, under the window of the next room, where Séverine was sleeping. And this, without his knowing why, instead of irritating him, filled him with pity and sadness: another unhappy man, that great brute, standing there, like a frantic and faithful beast. Really,

Séverine, so thin, not beautiful when it was looked at, was therefore of a very powerful charm, with its inky hair and its pale periwinkle eyes, so that the savages themselves, the stubborn colossi, thus had the flesh taken, until passing the nights at her door, like trembling little boys! He remembered the facts, the quarry's eagerness to help her, the looks of servitude with which he offered himself to her. Yes, certainly, Cabuche loved her, wanted her. And the next day, having watched him, he saw him furtively picking up a hairpin, which had fallen from his bun, while making the bed, and who kept it in his fist, so as not to return it. Jacques was thinking of his own torment, all that desire, all that came back to him troubled and frightening, with health.

Two more days passed, the week ended, and as the doctor had foreseen, the wounded were going to be able to resume their service. One morning, the mechanic, being at the window, saw his driver Pecqueux pass by on a brand new machine, who waved his hand at him as if calling him. But he was in no hurry, an awakening of passion held him there, a sort of anxious expectation of what was to happen. That same day, downstairs, he heard again the fresh, young laughter, the gaiety of grown-up girls, filling the sad abode with the din of a boarding school in recess. small Dauvergne. He did not mention it to Séverine, who, moreover, escaped the whole day, unable to stay near him for five minutes. Then, in the evening, the house fell into dead silence. And as she lingered in her room, looking serious, a little pale, he stared at her, he asked her:

"So he's gone, his sisters have taken him?"

She replied in a short voice:

—Yes.

—And we are alone after all, quite alone?

—Yes, quite alone… Tomorrow, we will have to leave us, I will return to Le Havre. It's over, camping in this desert.

He continued to look at her, smiling and embarrassed.

Yet he made up his mind.

—You regret that he left, eh?

And as she started, trying to protest, he stopped her.

—It is not a quarrel that I seek you. You can see that I am not jealous. One day you told me to kill you, if you were unfaithful to me, and, didn't you? I do not look like a lover who dreams of killing his mistress… But,

really, you were no longer moving from below. Can't have you with me for a minute. I ended up remembering what your husband said, that you would sleep one fine evening with this boy, without pleasure, only to start something else again.

She had stopped struggling, she repeated twice, slowly:

—Start over,

Then, in a burst of irresistible frankness:-

Well! listen, it's true… We can tell each other everything. There are enough things that bind us… for months he was chasing me, this man. He knew I was yours, he thought it wouldn't cost me more to be his. And, when I found him downstairs, he spoke to me again, he repeated to me that he loved me to death, the air so penetrated with gratitude for the care I was giving him, with a such sweetness of tenderness that, it's true, for a while I dreamed of loving her too, of starting something else again, something better, very sweet… Yes, something without pleasure maybe, but that would have calmed me down…

She paused, hesitated before continuing.

—Because, in front of both of us, now it's closed, we won't go any further… Our dream of leaving, this hope of being rich and happy, over there, in America, all that happiness that depended on you, it is impossible, since you could not… Oh! I do not blame you for anything, it is even better that the thing did not happen; but I want you to understand that with you I have nothing more to expect: tomorrow will be like yesterday, the same troubles, the same torments.

He let her speak, he only questioned her when he saw her shut up.

—And that's why you slept with the

She had taken a few steps into the room, she came back, shrugged her shoulders.

"No, I didn't sleep with him, and I'm just telling you, and you believe me, I'm sure, because now we don't have to lie to each other… No, I don't. could not, any more than you could yourself, on the other matter. Huh? it surprises you that a woman cannot give herself to a man, when she reasons the case, finding that it would be in her interest. Myself, I did not think so long, it had never cost me to be nice, I mean to give this pleasure to my husband or to you, when I saw you love me so much. Well! I couldn't, this times there. He kissed my hands, not even my lips, I swear. He is expecting

me in Paris later because I saw him so unhappy that I did not want to despair him.”

She was right, Jacques believed her, he saw clearly that she was not lying. And he was seized with anguish, the dreadful confusion of his desire grew, to think that he was now locked up alone with her, far from the world, in the rekindled flame of their passion. He wanted to escape, he exclaimed:

“But the other one too, there is another, this Cabuche!”

A sudden movement brought her back again.

—Ah! you noticed, you know that too… Yes, it’s true, he there is that one again. I wonder what they all have… that one never said a word to me. But I can see him twisting his arms when we kiss. He hears me talking to you, he cries in the corners. And then, he steals everything from me, my belongings, gloves, even handkerchiefs which disappear, which he takes there, in his cave, like treasures… Only, you will not go. imagine that I am able to give in to this savage. He’s too big, he would scare me. Besides, he doesn’t ask for anything… No, no, these great bullies, when it’s shy, they die of love, without demanding anything. You could give me a month in his care, he wouldn’t touch me not with his fingertips, any more than he had touched Louisette, that, I answer for today.

At this memory, their eyes met, a silence reigned. Things of the past were evoked, their meeting at the examining magistrate, in Rouen, then their first trip to Paris, so sweet, and their loves, to Le Havre, and all that had followed, good and terrible. She came closer, she was so close to him that he could feel the warmth of her breath.

—No, no, even less with that one than with the other. With no one, do you hear, because I couldn’t… and do you want to know why? Go, I feel it at this hour, I’m sure of do not deceive me: it is because you have taken me all. There is no other word: yes, taken, as one takes something with both hands, that one carries it, that one disposes of it every minute, as well as an object of one’s own. Before you, I haven’t been to anyone. I am yours and I will remain yours, even if you don’t want it, even if I don’t want it myself… that, I can not explain it. We met like this. With the others, it frightens me, it repels me; while you have made it a delicious pleasure, a true happiness from heaven… Ah! I only love you, I can love only you!

She stretched out her arms, to have him in her embrace, to put his head on his shoulder, his mouth to his lips. But he had grabbed her hands, he was

holding her back, bewildered, terrified to feel the old thrill rise from his limbs, with the blood pounding his head. It was the ringing of ears, the blows of the hammer, the crowd clamor of his great crises of old. For some time now, he hadn't been able to own her in broad daylight or even by candlelight, for fear of going mad, if he saw. And a lamp was there, which shone brightly on them both; and, if he trembled thus, if he began to become enraged, it must be because he saw the white roundness of his throat,

Supposing, burning, she continued:-

Our existence may be barred, too bad! If I don't expect anything new from you, if I know that tomorrow will bring back for us the same troubles and the same torments, I don't care, I have nothing else to do but drag my life and suffer with you. We are going to return to Le Havre, it will go as it likes, as long as I have you like this for an hour, from time to time… Here are three nights that I no longer sleep, tortured in my room, there, on the other side from the landing, by the need to come and join you. You had been so ill, you seemed so gloomy to me that I did n't dare… But, tell me, keep me tonight. You will see how it will be nice, I will make myself very small, so as not to bother you. And then, think it's the last night… We're at the end of the earth, in this house. listen, not a breath, not a soul. No one can come, we are alone, so absolutely alone, that no one would know, if we died in each other's arms.

Already, in the fury of his desire for possession, exalted by his caresses, Jacques, having no weapon, stretched out his fingers to strangle Séverine, when, of her own accord, she gave in to the habit, turned and extinguished the lamp. So he carried it off, they went to bed. It was one of their most ardent nights of love, the best, the only one where they felt confused, vanished into each other. Broken by this happiness, overwhelmed to the point of no longer feeling their bodies, they did not fall asleep, however, they remained bound by an embrace. And, as during the night of the confession, in Paris, in Mother Victoire's room, he listened to her, silent, while she, with her mouth glued to her ear, whispered endless words very low. Perhaps, that evening, she had felt death pass over her neck, before extinguishing the lamp. Until this day, she had remained smiling, unconscious, under the continual threat of murder, in the arms of her lover. But she had just had the little one cold shiver, and it was this unexplained

dread that tied her so tightly to that man’s chest, in need of protection. His light breath was like the very gift of his person.

—Oh! my darling, if you could, how happy we would have been there…! No, no, I’m not asking you to do what you can’t do anymore; only, I regret our dream so much! … I was afraid earlier. I don’t know, it seems to me that something is threatening me. It’s childish, no doubt: every minute, I turn around, as if someone were there, ready to hit me… And I have only you, my darling, to defend me. All my joy depends on you, you are now my only reason for living.

Without answering, he hugged her more, putting in this pressure what he did not say: her emotion, her sincere desire to be good for her, the violent love that she had not ceased to inspire in him. And he had wanted to kill her again that night; for, if she had not turned to extinguish the lamp, he would have strangled her, that was certain. He would never be cured, the crises returned to chance events, without his even being able to discover or discuss the causes. So why that evening, when he found her faithful, with a broadened and confident passion? Was it So that the more she loved him, the more he wanted to possess her, to the point of destroying her, in this fearful darkness of male selfishness? To have it like the earth, dead!

—Say, my darling, why am I afraid? Do you know something that threatens me?

—No, no, don’t worry, nothing threatens you.

—It’s that my whole body trembles at times. There is, behind me, a continual danger, which I do not see, but which I feel well… Why then am I afraid?

—No, no, don’t be afraid… I love you, I won’t let anyone hurt you… See, how good it is to be like this, one inside the other!

There was a delicious silence.

—Ah! my darling, she continued with her little breath of caress, nights and nights still, all the same as this one, endless nights where we would be like that, to be one… You know, we would sell this house, we would leave with the money, to join your friend in America, who is still waiting for you… Not a day do I go to bed, without fixing our life there… And, all the evenings, it would be like tonight. You would take me, I would be yours, we would end up falling asleep in each other’s arms… But you can’t, I know

that. If I tell you about it, it’s not to hurt you, it’s because it comes out of my heart, in spite of myself.

An abrupt decision, which he had already taken so often, invaded Jacques: kill Roubaud, so as not to kill her. This time, like the others, he thought he had the absolute, unshakeable will.

“I couldn’t,” he whispered in his turn, “but I can. Didn’t I promise you?”

She protested, weakly.

—No, do not promise, please… We are sick of it afterwards, when your courage failed you… And then, it’s awful, you must not, no, no! we must not.

“If you know it, you must, on the contrary. It is because I have to, that I will find the strength… I wanted to talk to you about it, and we are going to talk about it, since we are here, alone, quiet not to see ourselves the color of our words.”

Already she was resigned, sighing, her heart swelling, beating so hard that he felt it beating against his own heart.

—Oh! my God! as long as it didn’t have to happen, I wanted it… But, now that it is getting serious, I’m not going to live.

And they fell silent, there was another silence, under the heavy weight of this resolution. Around them, they smelled of the desert, the desolation of this savage country. They were very hot, their members sweaty, entwined, melted together.

Then, as, with a wandering caress, he placed kisses on her neck, under her chin, it was she who resumed her slight murmur.

“He would have to come here… Yes, I could call him, on some pretext.” I do not know which. We’ll see later… then, right? you would wait for it, you would hide yourself; and that would be fine, because we are sure not to be disturbed here… Huh? that’s what you have to do.

Docile, while his lips moved from chin to throat, he contented himself with answering:

“Yes, yes.”

But she, very thoughtful, weighed every detail; and, as the plan developed in her head, she discussed it and improved it.

“Only, my darling, it would be too stupid not to take our precautions.” If we were to get arrested the next day, I would rather stay as we are… you see, I read that, I don’t remember where, in a novel of course: the best

would be to make people believe in suicide… He's so funny for some time now, so out of whack and so gloomy that it wouldn't surprise anyone to suddenly learn that he came here to kill himself… But, there you are, it would be a question of finding the way, of fixing the thing, so that the idea of suicide was acceptable… Isn't it?

—Probably yes.

She looked around, suffocated a little, because he was picking her throat up under his lips, to kiss her all.

—Hey? something that would hide the trace… Hey, it's an idea! If, like, he had that around his neck, we'd just have to pick it up and wear it, the two of us out there across the way. Do you understand? we would put his neck on a rail, so that the first train would behead him. We could then search, when he had all that crushed: no more holes, nothing! … Are you okay?

—Yes, it's okay, it's very good.

Both came alive, she was almost cheerful and proud to have imagination. At a keener caress, she was traversed by a tremor.

—No, leave me, wait a little… Because, my darling, I'm thinking about it, it's not going yet. If you stay here with me, suicide when even will seem fishy. You have to go. Do you hear? tomorrow, you will leave, but in an open way, in front of Cabuche, in front of Misard, so that your departure is well established. You will take the train at Barentin, you will get off at Rouen, under a pretext; then, as soon as night falls, you will come back, I will let you in from behind. There are only four leagues, you can be back in less than three hours… This time, everything is settled. It's done, if you want to.

—Yes, I want it, it's done.

He himself, now, was thinking, no longer kissing her, inert. And there was still a silence, while they remained thus, without moving, in each other's arms, as if destroyed in the future, arrested, certain now. Then, slowly, the sensation of their two bodies returned to them, and they were choking in a growing embrace, when she stopped, her arms unfolded.

—Well! and the pretext for bringing him here? He will still only be able to take the eight o'clock train at night, after his shift, and he will not arrive before ten o'clock: that is better… Here! precisely this buyer for the house, about which Misard told me, and who is due to visit the day after tomorrow morning! Here, I am going to telegraph to my husband, when I get up, that

his presence is absolutely necessary. He will be there tomorrow night. You will leave in the afternoon, and you can be back before he come. It will be dark, no moon, nothing that bothers us… Everything is working out perfectly.

—Yes perfectly.

And this time, carried away to the point of fainting, they loved each other. When they finally fell asleep, at the bottom of the great silence, still holding each other with full arms, it was not daylight, the dawn of dawn was beginning to whiten the darkness which had hidden them from each other., as if wrapped in a black cloak. He, until ten o'clock, slept a crushed sleep, without a dream; and, when he opened his eyes, he was alone, she was dressing in her room, on the other side of the landing. A sheet of bright sunlight entered through the window, setting the the red curtains on the bed, the red drapes on the walls, all that red the room was on fire; while the house was shaking with the thunder of a passing train. It must have been this train that had woken him up. Dazzled, he looked at the sun, the red stream where he was; then he remembered: it was decided, it was the next night that he would kill, when that great sun had disappeared.

Things happened that day as Séverine and Jacques had stopped them. She, before lunch, begged Misard to take the dispatch for her husband to Doinville; and, around three o'clock, as Cabuche was there, he openly made his preparations for departure. Even, as he was leaving, to take the four-fourteen train from Barentin, the quarryman accompanied him, out of idleness, by the dull need which brought him closer to him, happy to find in the lover a little of the woman he he wanted. In Rouen, where Jacques arrived at twenty minutes to five, he went down near the station to an inn run by one of his countries. The next day, he spoke of seeing comrades, before going to Paris to resume his service. But he said he was very tired, having assumed too much of his strength; and, at six o'clock, he retired to sleep, in a room he had been given on the ground floor, with a window that opened onto a deserted lane. Ten minutes later, he was on his way to Croix-de-Maufras, after having stepped over that window, without being seen, taking great care to push the shutter back, so that he could enter that way, secretly.

It was not until a quarter past nine that Jacques found himself in front of the solitary house, planted at an angle by the side of the track, in the distress

of his abandonment. The night was very dark, not a light illuminated the hermetically sealed facade. And he still had in his heart the painful shock, that shock of terrible sadness, which was like a presentiment of the misfortune whose inevitable end awaited him there. As was agreed with Séverine, he threw three small stones in the shutter of the red room; then he passed behind the house, where a door, silently, finally opened. Having closed it behind him, he followed light footsteps that groped up the stairs. But upstairs, by the light of the big lamp burning on the corner of a table, when he saw the bed already unmade, the young woman's clothes thrown across a chair, and herself in a shirt, bare legs, combed for the night, with his thick hair, tied very high, freeing the neck, he remained motionless in surprise.

—How? "Or" What! did you go to bed?

—Without doubt, it is much better… An idea which is mine come. You understand, when he arrives and I go downstairs to open it like that, he'll be even less suspicious. I will tell him that I had a migraine. Misard already believes that I am in pain. that will allow me to say that I have not left this room, when tomorrow morning we find him, downstairs, on the track.

But Jacques shuddered, grew angry.

—No, no, get dressed… You must be standing. You can't stay like this.

She had started to smile, surprised.

—Why, darling? Don't worry, I assure you that I am not cold at all… Here! see if I'm hot!

With a cuddly movement, she her bare arms, raising her round throat, revealed by the shirt, slipped over one shoulder. And, as he drew back, in growing irritation, she became docile.

—Do not get angry, I will refill myself in bed. You will no longer be afraid that I will take harm.

When she was back in bed, the sheet over her chin, he seemed to calm down a little. Besides, she continued to talk calmly, she explained to him how she had arranged things in her head.

—As soon as he knocks, I will come down and open the door for him. First, I had the idea to let him go up here, where you would have expected him. But, to bring it down, that would have complicated even more; and then, in this room, it is parquet, while the vestibule is paved, which will allow me to wash easily, if there are any stains… Even, while undressing

myself a while ago, I was thinking of a novel, in which the author tells that a man, to kill another, had stripped naked. You understand? we wash afterwards, we don’t have a single splash on our clothes… Huh! What if you undress too, if we take our shirts off?

Startled, he looked at her. But she had her gentle face, her clear little girlish eyes, simply concerned with the good conduct of the business, for success. It was all happening in his head. Him, at this evocation of their two nudities, under the splash of murder was resumed, shaken to the bone, with an abominable shudder.

—No, no! … Like savages, then. Why not eat his heart? So you hate him?

Severine’s face had suddenly darkened. This question threw her, from her preparations as a prudent housewife, into the horror of the act. Tears flooded his eyes.

—I have suffered too much for several months, I can hardly love him. A hundred times, I’ve told you everything, rather than staying with this man for another week. But, you’re right, it’s awful to come to this, we really have to want to be happy together… Finally, we will descend without light. put behind the door, and when I will have opened it and he will have entered, you will do as you wish… Me, if I take care of it, it is to help you, it is so that you don’t worry about yourself alone. I arrange it as best I can.

In front of the table he had stopped when he saw the knife, the weapon which had already been used by the husband himself, and which she had obviously just put there, so that he could strike it in his turn. Wide open, the knife shone under the lamp. He took it, examined it. She was silent, watching too. Since he had it, there was no point in telling him about it. And she did not continue until he had put her back on the table.

—Is not it? my darling, it’s not me pushing you. There is still time, go away, if you cannot.

But, with a violent gesture, he persisted.

—Do you take me for a coward? This time, it’s done, it’s sworn!

At this moment, the house was shaken by the thunder of a train, which passed in a thunderbolt, so close to the room that it seemed to pass through it with its roar; and he added:-

Here is his train, direct from Paris. He went down to Barentin, he will be here in half an hour.

And neither Jacques nor Séverine spoke any more, a long silence reigned. There they saw this man walking through the narrow paths, through the dark night. He, mechanically, had started walking in the room as well, as if he had been counting the other's steps, each step bringing a little closer. One more, one more; and, at the last, he would be ambushed behind the door of the vestibule, he would stick the knife in his neck as soon as he entered. She, the sheet still on her chin, lying on her back, with her large fixed eyes, watched him come and go, her mind rocked by the cadence of his walk, which came to her like an echo of distant footsteps over there. Endlessly one after another, nothing would stop them. When there was enough, she would jump out of bed, come down open, feet naked, without light. "It's you, my friend, come in so I went to bed." And he wouldn't even answer, he would fall into the darkness with his throat open.

Again, a train passed, one descending this one, the omnibus which crossed the direct in front of Croix-de-Maufras, five minutes away. Jacques had stopped, surprised. Just five minutes ! how long it would be to wait half an hour! A need for movement drove him, he began to walk from one end of the room to the other. He was already wondering, worried, like those males who are struck by a nervous accident in their virility: could he? He knew well, in him, the march of phenomenon, for having followed it more than ten times: first, a certainty, an absolute resolution to kill; then, a tightness in the hollow of the chest, a cooling of the feet and hands; and, suddenly, the weakness, the uselessness of the will on the muscles which have become inert. In order to excite himself by reasoning, he repeated to himself what he had said so many times: his interest in suppressing this man, the fortune that awaited him in America, the possession of the woman he loved. The worst was that, a short while ago, on finding this last half-naked, he had really believed the affair still failed; for he ceased to belong to himself as soon as his old shudder reappeared. For a moment, he had just trembled before the too strong temptation, it which offered itself, and this open knife, which was there. But now he remained solid, bound to the effort. He could. And he continued to wait for the man, beating the room, from the door to the window, passing at each turn near the bed, which he did not want to see.

Séverine, in this bed, where they had loved each other during the scorching, dark hours of the previous night, still did not move. Her head

motionless on the pillow, she followed him with a back and forth gaze, also anxious, agitated by the fear that, again that night, he would not dare. Ending it, to start again, she wanted only that, at the bottom of her unconsciousness of woman of love, complaisant to the man, all to him who held her, heartless for the other whom she had never wanted. We got rid of it, since it was in the way, nothing was more natural; and she had to reflect, to be moved by the abomination of crime: as soon as the image of blood, of horrible complications faded again, she fell back to her smiling calm, with her face of innocence, tender and docile. However, she, who thought she knew Jacques well, was surprised. He had the round head of a handsome boy, his curly hair, his very black mustache, his diamond brown eyes. Golden; but his lower jaw protruded so much, in a sort of rant, that he was disfigured. As he passed her, he had just looked at her, as if in spite of himself, and the glint of his eyes had dimmed with a reddish smoke, as he threw himself back, with a full recoil. body. What then had he to avoid? Was his courage, once again, failing him? For some time now, in ignorance of the continual danger of death in which she was with him, she had explained the instinctive, instinctive fear she felt by the presentiment of an approaching rupture. Suddenly she was convinced that, if, just now, he would flee never to come back. So she decided that he would kill, that she would know how to give him the strength, if it was needed. At that moment, a new train was passing, an interminable freight train, the tail of which seemed to roll for an eternity, in the heavy silence of the room. And, raised on one elbow, she waited until this hurricane shock was lost in the distance, in the depths of the sleeping countryside:

“Another quarter of an hour,” said Jacques aloud. He passed the Bois de Bécourt, he is halfway. Ah! how long it is!

But, as he returned to the window, he found, standing in front of the bed, Séverine in a shirt.

“If we went down with the lamp,” she explained. You would see the place, you would position yourself, I would show you how I will open the door and what movement you will have to make.

He, trembling, stepped back.

—No no! not the lamp!

—Listen, then we’ll hide it. However, we must realize.

—No no! go back to bed!

She did not obey, she walked on him, on the contrary, with the invincible and despotic smile of the woman who knows herself all-powerful by desire. When she held him in her arms, he would give in to her flesh, he would do whatever she wanted. And she continued to speak, in a caressing voice, to overcome him.

—Let’s see, my darling, what’s the matter? Looks like you’re scared of me. As soon as I approach, you seem to avoid me. And if you knew, at this moment, how I need to lean on you, to feel that you are there, that we are in agreement, forever, always, do you hear!

She had ended up pushing him to the table, and he couldn’t run away from her any more, he was looking at her, in the bright light of the lamp. He had never seen her like this, her shirt open, her hair so high that she was quite naked, her neck bare, her breasts bare. He was suffocating, struggling, already carried away, stunned by the flow of his blood, in the abominable shiver. And he remembered that the The knife was there behind him on the table: he could feel it, he had only to stretch out his hand.

With an effort, he managed to stutter again:-

Go back to bed, I beg of you.

But she was not mistaken: it was too much desire for her that made him tremble. She herself had a sort of pride in it. Why would she have obeyed him, since she wanted to be loved, that night, as much as he could love her, until she was mad about it? Softly cuddly, she always came closer, was on him.

—Say, kiss me… Kiss me very hard, as you love me. This will give us courage… Ah! yes, courage, we we need! You have to love yourself differently than others, more than all the others, to do what we are going to do… Kiss me with all your heart, with all your soul.

Strangled, he was no longer breathing. A crowd clamor in his skull prevented him from hearing; while fiery bites, behind his ears, pierced his head, gained his arms, his legs, chased him out of his own body, under the gallop of the other, the invading beast. His hands were no longer going to be his, in the excessive intoxication of this woman’s nakedness. The bare breasts were crushed against her clothes, the naked neck was stretched out, so white, so delicate, with an irresistible temptation; and the warm and harsh smell, sovereign, finished throwing him into a furious dizziness, an endless sway, in which his will sank, torn, annihilated.

—Kiss me, my darling, while we have one more minute… You know he’s going to be there. Now, if he has walked quickly, from one second to the next, he can knock… Since you don’t want us to go down, remember well: I will open; you will be behind the door; and do not wait, yet, oh! now, to end it… I love you so much, we will be so happy! He is just a bad man who made me suffer, who is the only obstacle to our happiness… Kiss me, oh! so strong, so strong! kiss me as if you were eating me, so that there is nothing left of me except you!

Jacques, without looking back, with his right hand, groping backwards, had taken the knife. And for a moment he stood there, clenching it in his fist. Was it his thirst that had returned, to avenge very old offenses, of which he would have lost the exact memory, this resentment gathered from male to male, since the first deception deep in the caves? He fixed his crazy eyes on Séverine, he had only the need to throw her dead on his back, like a prey that is snatched from others. The door of terror opened on this black abyss of sex, love even in death, destroy in order to possess more.

“Kiss me, kiss me…”

She threw back her submissive face, with supplicating tenderness, uncovered her bare neck, with the voluptuous attachment of the throat. And he, seeing this white flesh, as in a burst of fire, raised his fist, armed with the knife. But she had seen the flash of the blade, she threw herself back, gaping in surprise and terror.

—Jacques, Jacques… Me, my God! Why? Why?

His teeth clenched, he didn’t say a word, he chased her. A short struggle brought her back to the bed. She stepped back, haggard, helpless, her shirt torn off.

—Why? my God! Why?

And he slashed his fist, and the knife stuck the question in his throat. When he struck, he had turned the weapon over, by a frightful need of the hand which was content: the same blow as for President Grandmorin, in the same place, with the same rage. Did she scream? he never knew it. At that second the Paris express passed, so violent, so rapid that the floor trembled; and she was dead, as if struck down in this storm.

Motionless, Jacques now looked at her, stretched out at his feet in front of the bed. The train was lost in the distance, he looked at her in the heavy silence of the red room. In the middle of these red curtains, these red

curtains, on the floor, she was bleeding a lot, a red stream which streamed between the breasts, spread over the belly, up to a thigh, from which it fell in large drops on the floor. The half-split shirt was soaked in it. He would never have believed that she had so much blood. And what held him back, haunted, was the mask of abominable terror which the face of a pretty, gentle, so docile woman assumed in death. Black hair had stood on end, a horror helmet, dark as night. The periwinkle eyes, widened disproportionately, still questioned, bewildered, terrified of the mystery. Why, why had he murdered her? And she had just been crushed, carried away in the fatality of the murder, in oblivious that life had rolled mud in blood, tender and innocent all the same, without her ever having understood.

But Jacques was surprised. He heard the snort of an animal, the growl of a boar, the roar of a lion; and he calmed down, it was he who was breathing. Finally, finally! he was therefore content, he had killed! Yes, he had done that. An unbridled joy, a pleasure the huge raised, in full satisfaction of the eternal desire. He felt a surprise of pride, an increase in his male sovereignty. The woman, he had killed her, he possessed her, as he had wanted for so long to possess her, entirely, to the point of annihilating her. She was no more, she would never belong to anyone. And a keen memory came back to him, that of the other murdered, the corpse of President Grandmorin, which he had seen, during the terrible night, five hundred meters away. This delicate body, so white, streaked with red, was the same human wreck, the broken puppet, the soft rag, which a stab wounds from a creature. Yes, that was it. He had killed, and there was it on the floor. Like the other, she had just tumbled, but on her back, her legs apart, her left arm bent under her side, her right twisted, half torn from the shoulder. Was it not that night that, his heart beating violently, he had sworn to himself to dare in his turn, in a murderous itch that was exasperated like lust, at the sight of the slain man? Ah! not to be cowardly, to be satisfied, to drive the knife! Obviously, it had germinated, had grown in him; not an hour in a year before he had walked towards the inevitable; even around this woman’s neck, beneath her kisses, the secret work was ending; and the two murders had joined, was not the one the logic of the other?

A tumult of collapse, a shaking of the floor, drew Jacques from the gaping contemplation in which he remained, in front of the dead woman.

Were the doors shattered? Were they people to stop him? He looked, deaf and mute loneliness. Ah! yes, a train again! And this man who was going to strike down, this man he wanted to kill! He had forgotten it completely. If he regretted nothing, he already considered himself an imbecile. What? what had happened? The woman he loved, by whom he was passionately loved, was lying on the floor with her throat open; while the husband, the obstacle to her happiness, still lived, still advanced, step by step, in the darkness. This man, who for months had spared the scruples of his education, the ideas of humanity slowly acquired and transmitted, he had not been able to wait for; and, in defiance of his own interests, he had just been carried away by the heredity of violence, by this need for murder which, in the first forests, threw the beast on the beast. Do we kill by reasoning! One only kills under the impulse of blood and nerves, a remnant of old struggles, the need to live and the joy of being strong. He had nothing more than a sated weariness, he was terrified, trying to understand, without finding anything else, at the very bottom of his satisfied passion, than the astonishment and the bitter sadness of the irreparable. The sight of the unfortunate woman, who was still looking at him, with her terrified questioning, became atrocious to him. He wanted to look away, he had the sudden sensation that another white figure was rising up at the foot bed. Was it therefore a duplication of the dead? Then he recognized Flore. She had come back, while he had a fever, after the accident. No doubt she was triumphant, avenged at this hour. Terror froze him, he wondered what he was doing, lingering like this in this room. He had killed, he was gorged, sated, drunk with the terrible wine of crime. And he stumbled into the knife that was left on the ground, and he fled, rolled down the stairs, opened the large door of the steps as if the little door had not been wide enough, launched himself outside, in the night of ink, where his gallop got lost, furious. He had not turned around, the shady house, planted at an angle side of the way, remained open and desolate behind him, in his abandonment of death.

Cabuche, that night like the others, had crossed the hedge of the land, prowling under Séverine’s window. He knew very well that Roubaud was expected, he was not surprised by the light which filtered through the slit of a shutter. But this man leaping from the steps, this enraged gallop of a beast moving away into the country, had just nailed him with surprise. And it was

already too late to go in pursuit of the fugitive, the quarryman remained bewildered, full of anxiety and hesitation in front of the open door, yawning on the great black hole in the vestibule. What was happening so? should he enter? The heavy silence, the absolute stillness, while that lamp continued to burn up there, gripped his heart with increasing anguish.

Finally, Cabuche made up his mind and groped up. In front of the bedroom door, also left open, he stopped again. In the quiet light, he seemed to see a pile of petticoats in the distance in front of the bed. No doubt Séverine was undressed. Slowly, he called, confused, his veins thumping. Then he saw the blood, he understood, rushed forward, with a terrible cry that issued from his torn heart. My God! it was she, murdered, thrown there, in her pitiful nakedness. he thought she was still moaning, he had such despair, such a painful shame, at seeing her agonize naked, that he seized her with a fraternal impulse, with both arms, lifted her, put her on the bed, he threw back the sheet to cover her. But, in this embrace, the only tenderness between them, he was covered in blood, both hands, chest. He was streaming with his blood. And, at that minute, he saw that Roubaud and Misard were there. They too had just decided to go upstairs, finding all the doors open. The husband arrived late, for having stopped talking with the gatekeeper, who had then accompanied him, continuing the conversation. Both, stupid, looked at Cabuche, whose hands were bleeding like a butcher’s.

“The same as for the president,” Misard said at last, examining the wound. Roubaud nodded without answering, unable to take his eyes off Severine, from that mask of abominable terror, the black hair standing up on his forehead, the disproportionately wide blue eyes, which asked why.

XII

Three months later, on a warm June night, Jacques was driving the express from Le Havre, which left Paris at six-thirty. His new machine, the machine 608, brand new, of which he had virginity, he said, and that he was starting to do well. to know, was not easy, restive, whimsical, like these young escorts who must be tamed by wear and tear, before they resign themselves to the harness. He often swore at her, regretting the Lison; he had to watch her closely, his hand still on the shift wheel. But that night the sky was so delicious that he felt indulgent, letting her gallop a little as he fancied, himself happy to breathe deeply. He had never been better off, without remorse, looking relieved, in great happy peace.

He who never spoke on the road, joked Pecqueux, who had been left to him as a driver.

—What? you open your eyes like a man who has drunk only water.

Pecqueux, in fact, against his habit, seemed empty-handed and very gloomy. He replied in a harsh voice: “You have to

keep your eyes open when you want to see clearly.”

Defiant, Jacques looked at him, like a man whose conscience is not clear. The previous week, he had let himself go into the arms of his comrade’s mistress, that terrible Philomène, who for a long time had rubbed herself against him like a thin cat in love. And there had not been there only a moment of sensual curiosity, he gave in above all to the desire to make an experiment: was he definitively cured, now that he had satisfied his awful need? this one, could he possess it, without sticking a knife in its throat? Twice already, he had had it, and nothing, not a discomfort, not a thrill. His great joy, his calm and laughing air, must have come, even without his knowledge, from the happiness of being no more than a man like the others.

Pecqueux having opened the hearth of the machine, to put in coal, he stopped it.

—No, no, don’t push her too hard, she’s fine.

So the driver growled bad words.

—Ah! ouitche! well… A pretty prankster, a beautiful crap! … When I think that we were hitting on the other, the old woman, who was so docile! … This bitch here, it doesn’t not worth a kick in the ass.

Jacques, so as not to have to get angry, avoided answering. But he felt that the old threesome was gone; for the good friendship between him, the comrade, and the machine was gone when La Lison died. Now we were arguing over nothing, over a nut that was too tight, over a shovelful of charcoal put in the wrong way. And he promised himself to be careful with Philomène, not wanting to end up with an open war, on this narrow moving floor which carried them, him and his driver. As long as Pecqueux, out of gratitude for not being rushed, to be able to take small sums and complete the baskets of provisions, his dog had become obedient, devoted to the point of strangling the world, both had lived as brothers, silent in daily danger, needing no words to get along. But it was going to become hell if we no longer suited each other, always side by side, shaking together, while we ate each other. Precisely, the Company had had, the previous week, to separate the mechanic and the driver of the Cherbourg express, because, disunited because of a woman, the first brutalized the second who no longer obeyed : blows, real battles on the way, in complete oblivion of the line of travelers rolling behind them, at full speed.

Twice more, Pecqueux reopened the hearth, threw coal there, out of disobedience, doubtless seeking an argument; and Jacques pretended not to notice it, looking ready to maneuver, with the sole precaution each time of turning the wheel of the injector, to reduce the pressure. It was so mild, the little fresh wind from the walk was so good, on the hot July night ! At five past eleven, when the express arrived at Le Havre, the two men cleaned the machine with an air of agreement, as in the past.

But just as they were leaving the depot to go to bed in the rue François-Mazeline, a voice called them out.

—So we are in a hurry? Enter a minute!

It was Philomène, who, from the threshold of her brother’s house, was to watch Jacques. She had had a movement of lively annoyance on seeing Pecqueux; and she made up her mind to hail them together, only for the pleasure of talking at least with her new friend, even if it means enduring the presence of the old one.

—Leave us alone, eh! growled Pecqueux. You annoy us, we are sleepy.

—He is amiable! replied Philomène cheerfully. But Monsieur Jacques is not like you, he would take a little glass all the same… Is he not, Monsieur Jacques?

The mechanic was about to refuse, out of prudence, when the driver abruptly agreed, giving in to the idea of watching them and make a certainty. They entered the kitchen, they sat down in front of the table, where she had put glasses and a bottle of brandy, resuming in a lower voice:-

You must try not to make too much noise, because my brother sleeps up there, and he doesn’t like it when I receive people.

Then, as she was serving them, she immediately added:-

By the way, you know that Mother Lebleu is slammed this morning… Oh! I said that: it will kill her, if we put her in this back room, a real prison. She lasted another four months, eating her blood to see nothing but zinc… And what finished her, as soon as it became her impossible to move from her chair, it was surely not being able to spy on Mademoiselle Guichon and Monsieur Dabadie, a habit she had acquired. Yes, she was enraged at never having surprised anything between them, she died of it.

Philomène stopped, took a sip of brandy; and, with a laugh:-

No doubt they sleep together. Only they are so clever! Neither seen nor known, I confuse you! … I believe all the same that little Madame Moulin saw them one evening. But no danger that she causes, that one: she is too stupid, and besides her husband, the deputy…

Again, she broke off to exclaim:

“Say, next week will be judged, in Rouen, the Roubaud affair.”

Until then, Jacques and Pecqueux had listened to her, without saying a word. The latter found her simply very talkative; never, with him, did she incur so much conversation costs; and he never took his eyes off her, little by little heated with jealousy at seeing her thus aroused before her boss.

“Yes,” replied the mechanic, with an air of complete tranquility, “I have received the quote.”

Philomène came closer, happy to brush her elbow against him.

—I too, I am a witness… Ah! Monsieur Jacques, when I was asked about you, because you know that we wanted to know the real truth about your relationship with this poor lady; yes, when I was questioned, I said to

the judge: “But, sir, he adored him, it is impossible that he harmed him!” Is not it? I had seen you together, I was in a good position to talk about it.

—Oh! said the young man with a gesture of indifference, I was not worried, I could give, hour by hour, the use of my time… If the Company kept me, it is because he did not there wasn’t the slightest complaint to make me.

Silence reigned, all three drank slowly.

“It makes one shudder,” replied Philomène. This ferocious beast, this Cabuche that we arrested, lady! Must there be idiotic men! kill a woman because you want her, as if it were advancing them to something, when the woman is no longer there! … and what I will never forget in life, you see, It was when Monsieur Cauche, over there on the quay, also came to arrest Monsieur Roubaud. I was there. You know that this happened only eight days later, when Monsieur Roubaud, the day after his wife’s funeral, had resumed his service with a calm air. So, Monsieur Cauche tapped him on the shoulder, saying that he had the order to take him to prison. You think! they who never left each other, who played together, whole nights! But, when you’re a commissioner, right? one would lead his father and his mother to the guillotine, since it is the profession that wants that. He doesn’t care, Monsieur Cauche! I saw him again at the Café du Commerce, a while ago, shuffling the cards, no more worrying about his friend than about the great Turk! Pecqueux, clenched teeth, punched the table.

—Thunder of God! if I were in the place of this Roubaud cuckold! … You slept with his wife, you. Another kills her. And now we send him to the assizes… No, it’s to die for rage!

“But, great beast,” cried Philomène, “since she is accused of having urged the other to rid him of his wife, yes, for money matters, do I know! It seems that President Grandmorin’s watch was found at Cabuche: you remember the gentleman who was murdered in a train car eighteen months ago. So we hung up this bad thing with the bad thing the other day, quite a story, a real ink bottle. I can’t explain it to you, but it was on the newspaper, there were indeed two columns.”

Distracted, Jacques did not even seem to listen. He murmured:

“What is the point of racking your brains, does that concern us? … If justice does not know what it is doing, it is not we who will know.”

Then he added, his eyes lost in the distance, his cheeks invaded by pallor: “In all this, there is only this poor woman. Ah!” the poor, the poor woman!

“I,” concluded Pecqueux violently, “I who have one, a woman, if someone dared to touch her, I would start by strangling them both.” Afterwards, someone could cut my neck off, I wouldn’t mind.

There was another silence. Philomène, who was refilling the small glasses a second time, affected to shrug her shoulders, laughing. But deep down, she was quite upset, she was studying him with a sidelong glance. He had neglected himself a lot, very dirty, in rags, since Mother Victoire, who became helpless as a result of her fracture, had to give up her health post and be admitted to a hospice. She was no longer there, tolerant and maternal, to slip him white pieces, to mend him, not wanting the other, the one from Havre, to accuse her of holding their man badly. And Philomène, seduced by Jacques’ cute and clean air, was disgusted.

“Is it your wife from Paris that you would strangle?” she asked bravely. No danger of being taken away from you, that one!

—That or another! he growled.

But she was already drinking, with a joking air.

—To your health! And bring me your laundry, so I can have them washed and darned, for, really, you no longer do us honor, neither to the one nor to the other… To your health, Monsieur Jacques!

As if he had emerged from a dream, Jacques started. In the complete absence of remorse, in this relief, this physical well-being in which he had lived since the murder, Séverine thus sometimes passed, pitying to tears the gentle man who was in him. And he clinked glasses, saying hastily, to hide his confusion:

“Do you know that we are going to have war?”

—Not possible! exclaimed Philomène. Who with?

“But with the Prussians… Yes, because of a prince from their country who wants to be king in Spain.” Yesterday in the House he did question that of this story.

So she was sorry.

—Ah well! it will be funny! They have already bothered us enough, with their elections, their plebiscite and their riots, in Paris! … If we fight, say, will we take all the men?

—Oh! we are parked, we cannot disorganize the railroads… Only, what we would be jostled, because of the transport of troops and supplies! Finally, if that happens, we will have to do our duty.

And with that word he got up, seeing that she had finally slipped one of her legs under his, and that Pecqueux noticed it, blood in his face, already clenching his fists.

—Let’s go to bed, it’s time.

“Yes, it will be better,” stammered the driver.

He had grasped Philomène’s arm, he was squeezing it to break it. She suppressed a cry of pain, she contented herself with whispering in the mechanic’s ear, while the other angrily finished his little glass:

“Beware, he’s a real brute, when he has been drinking.”

But, on the stairs, heavy footsteps descended; and she was scared.

—My brother! … Run quickly, run quickly!

The two men were not twenty paces from the house when they heard slaps, followed by screams. She received an abominable correction, like a little girl caught in the wrong, the nose in a jar of jams. The mechanic had stopped, ready to rescue her. But he was held back by the driver.

—What? Does that concern you? … Ah! the name of God of bitch! if he could knock her out!

Rue François-Mazeline, Jacques and Pecqueux went to bed, without exchanging a word. The two beds were almost touching, in the narrow bedroom; and for a long time they lay awake with their eyes open, each listening to the breathing of the other.

It was on Monday that the debates of the Roubaud affair were to begin in Rouen. This was a triumph for the examining magistrate Denizet, because there was no shortage of praise, in the judicial world, on the way in which he had just carried out this complicated and obscure affair: a masterpiece of fine analysis, it was said, a logical reconstruction of the truth, a real creation, in short.

First, as soon as he was transported to the scene, at Croix-de-Maufras, a few hours after Séverine’s murder, Mr. Denizet had Cabuche arrested. Everything openly pointed to this one, the blood from which it flowed, the overwhelming depositions of Roubaud and Misard, who told how they had surprised him, with the corpse, alone, bewildered. Asked, eager to say why and how he was in this room, the quarryman stammered out a story, which

the judge greeted with a shrug of the shoulders, it seemed so silly and classic to him. He was waiting for him, this story, always the same, of the imaginary murderer, of the invented culprit, whose real culprit said he heard the flight, through the black countryside. That werewolf was far away, wasn't he? if he was still running. Moreover, when asked what he was doing in front of the house at such an hour, Cabuche became confused, refused to answer, ended by declaring that he was walking. It was childish, how to believe in this mysterious stranger, murdering, running away, leaving all doors open, nor took away even a handkerchief? Where would he have come from? why would he have killed? The judge, however, from the start of his investigation, having known the connection between the victim and Jacques, worried about the latter's use of time; but, apart from the fact that the accused himself admitted having accompanied Jacques to Barentin, for the four-fourteen train, the innkeeper of Rouen swore his great gods that the young man, lying down immediately after his dinner, had only gone out. from his room the next day, around seven o'clock. And then, a lover does not without reason slaughter a mistress he adores, with whom he has never had the shadow of a quarrel. It would be absurd. No! no! there was no that a possible assassin, an obvious assassin, the convict found there, the red hands, the knife at his feet, this brute beast which made justice to the tales to sleep standing.

But at this point, in spite of his conviction, in spite of his flair which, he said, informed him better than the proofs, M. Denizet felt a moment of embarrassment. In a first search, carried out at the defendant's hovel, in the middle of the Bécourt forest, absolutely nothing had been discovered. As the theft could not be established, another motive for the crime had to be found. Suddenly, at the chance of an interrogation, Misard put him on the track, telling that he had seen, one night, Cabuche climbing the wall of the property, to look through the bedroom window at Madame Roubaud who was going to bed. Questioned in his turn, Jacques quietly said what he knew, the mute adoration of the quarryman, the ardent desire with which he pursued her, still in his skirts, to serve her. No doubt was no longer allowed: only a bestial passion had driven him; and everything was rebuilding itself very well, the man coming back through the door to which he could have a key, even leaving it open in his confusion, then the struggle which had led to the murder, finally the rape interrupted only by the arrival of the husband.

However, a final objection arose, for it was singular that man, knowing this imminent arrival, would have chosen precisely the hour when the husband could surprise him; but, come to think of it, this turned against the accused, finished off overwhelming him, by establishing that he must have acted under the empire of a supreme crisis of desire, distraught by this thought that, if he did not profit not from the moment Séverine was still alone, in this isolated house, he would never have her again, since she was leaving the next day. From that moment the judge's conviction was complete, unshakeable.

Harassed by interrogations, caught up in the skilful skein of questions, heedless of the traps set for him, Cabuche persisted in his first version. He was passing on the road, he was breathing the fresh night air, when an individual had grazed him galloping, and with such a race, in the depths of darkness, that he could not even tell which way he was fleeing. Then, seized with anxiety, having glanced at the house, he noticed that the door had remained wide open. And he had finally made up his mind to go upstairs, and he had found the dead woman, still hot, gazing at him with her wide eyes, so that, in order to put her on the bed, believing her alive, he had filled himself with blood… He only knew that, he only repeated that, he never varied a detail, seeming to be locked in a story fixed in advance. When we tried to get him out of it, he was terrified, kept silent, like a narrow- minded man who no longer understood. The first time M. Denizet had asked him about his passion for the victim, he had become very red, like a very young boy who is reproached for his first affection; and he had denied, he had defended himself from having dreamed of sleeping with this lady, as of a very nasty, shameful thing, a delicate and mysterious thing too, buried in the depths of his heart, of which he should not know. 'confession to no one. No no! he didn't love her, he didn't want her, we would never make him talk about what he thought was a profanation now that But this stubbornness not to agree to a fact that several witnesses affirmed, still turned against him. Naturally, according to the version of the accusation, he had an interest in hiding the furious desire in which he was for this unfortunate woman, whom he had to slaughter to be satisfied. And, when the judge, gathering all the proofs, wishing to wrest the truth from him by striking the decisive blow, had thrown this murder and this rape in his face, he had entered into a mad rage of protest. Him, kill her to have it! he, who

respected her like a saint! The gendarmes, called back, must have kept him down, while he spoke of strangling the whole sacred shop. A rascal of the most dangerous in short, devious, but whose violence broke out all the same, confessing for him the crimes he denied.

The investigation was there, the defendant went into a rage, shouted that it was the other, the mysterious fugitive, every time we came back to the assassination, when Mr. Denizet made a find, which transformed the affair., suddenly increased its importance. As he said, he sniffed out truths; so he wanted, by a sort of foreboding, to carry out a new search himself in the hovel of Cabuche; and there he discovered, simply behind a beam, a hiding place where there were handkerchiefs and women's gloves, under which was a watch. gold, which he immediately recognized, with a great surprise of joy: it was the watch of President Grandmorin, so sought after by him in the past, a strong watch with two intertwined initials, bearing inside the case the figure of 2516. this production received the thunderbolt, all lit up, the past was connected to this, the facts that rattachait enchanted by their logic. But the consequences would carry so far, that, without speaking of the watch first, he questioned Cabuche about the gloves and the handkerchiefs. The latter, for a moment, had the confession on his lips: yes, he adored her, yes, he wanted her, even kissing the dresses she had carried, even to pick up, to steal behind her everything that fell from her person, bits of laces, staples, pins. Then, a shame, an invincible modesty, made him be silent. And when the judge, making up his mind, put the watch in front of him, he looked at it with a bewildered air. He remembered well: he had been surprised to find this watch tied in the corner of a handkerchief, taken under a bolster, taken home like prey; then she had stood there, while he racked his brains, figuring out how to return it. Only, what's the use of telling that? We should confess his other thefts, these rags, this linen which smelled good, which was so ashamed. Already no one believed anything he said. Besides, he himself was beginning to no longer understand, everything was blurring in his simple man's head, he was entering a nightmare. And he didn't even get angry at the murder charge; he remained dazed, he repeated each question he did not know. As for gloves and handkerchiefs, he didn't know. For the watch, he didn't know. We annoyed him, we just had to leave him alone and guillotine him right away.

M. Denizet had Roubaud arrested the next day. He had launched the mandate, strong in his omnipotence, in one of those inspiring moments in which he believed in the genius of his perspicacity, even to have sufficient charges against the deputy. Despite still many obscurities, he divined in this man the pivot, the source of the double affair; and he triumphed immediately, when he had seized the donation to the last living that Roubaud and Séverine had made before Master Colin, notary in Le Havre, eight days after having returned in possession of the Croix-de-Maufras. From then on, the whole story was reconstructed in its skull, with a certainty of reasoning, a force of evidence, which gave to its scaffolding of accusation such an indestructible solidity, that the truth itself would have seemed less true, tainted. more fantasy and illogicality. Roubaud was a coward who, on two occasions, not daring to kill himself, had used the arm of Cabuche, that violent beast. The first time, eager to inherit from President Grandmorin, whose will he knew, knowing on the other hand the quarry's grudge against him, he had pushed him to Rouen in the coupe, after putting the knife in him. fist. Then, the ten thousand francs shared, the two accomplices would perhaps never have seen each other again, if the murder did not lead to the murder. And it was here that the judge had shown that depth of criminal psychology that we admired so much; because he declared it today, he had never stopped watching Cabuche, his conviction was that the first assassination would mathematically lead to a second. Eighteen months were enough: the Roubaud household had spoiled, the husband had eaten the five thousand francs at play, the wife had come to find a lover, to amuse herself. No doubt she refused to sell Croix-de-Maufras, for fear that he would dissipate the money; perhaps, in their continual disputes, she threatened to deliver him to justice. In any case, numerous testimonies established the absolute disunity of the two spouses; and there, finally, the distant consequence of the first crime had occurred: Cabuche reappeared with his brutish appetites, the husband in the shadows him. put the knife in his fist, to definitively secure the ownership of this cursed house, which had already cost a human life. Such was the truth, the blinding truth, everything ended there : the watch found at the quarryman's, especially the two corpses, struck at the same time in the throat, by the same hand, with the same weapon, this knife picked up in the room.

However, on this last point, the prosecution cast doubt, the president’s wound appearing to have been made by a smaller, sharper blade.

Roubaud, at first, answered yes and no, with the drowsy and heavy look he now had. He didn’t seem surprised at his arrest, everything had become equal to him in the slow disorganization of his being. To make him talk, he had been given a permanent guardian, with whom he played cards from morning to night; and he was perfectly happy. Besides, he remained convinced of Cabuche’s guilt: he alone could be the murderer. Asked about Jacques, he shrugged his shoulders laughing, showing that he was familiar with the mechanic’s and Séverine’s reports. But, when M. Denizet, after having tested him, finally developed his system, pushing him, overwhelming him with his complicity, striving to wrest a confession from him, in the shock of seeing himself discovered, he had become very circumspect. What were they telling him there? It was no longer him, it was the quarryman who had killed the president, as he had killed Séverine; and both times he was nevertheless the culprit, since the other struck on his behalf and in his stead. This complicated adventure stunned him, filled him with suspicion: surely they were setting a trap for him, lying to force him to confess his share of murder, the first crime. As soon as he was arrested, he had suspected that the old story was pushing back. Confronted with Cabuche, he declared not to know him. Only, as he kept repeating that he had found him red with blood, on the verge of raping his victim, the quarryman got angry, and a violent scene, of extreme confusion, further confused matters. Three days passed, the judge multiplied the interrogations, certain that the two accomplices agreed to play the comedy of their hostility to him. Roubaud, very weary, had made up his mind not to answer any more, when, all of a sudden, in a moment of impatience, wanting to put an end to it, giving in to a deaf need which had been plaguing him for months, he let go of the truth, nothing but the truth, the whole truth.

That very day, M. Denizet was struggling with finesse, seated at his desk, veiling his eyes with his heavy lids, while his moving lips thinned in an effort of sagacity. he had been exhausted for an hour in clever tricks, with this thickened defendant, invaded by a bad yellow fat, which he judged to be a very delicate cunning, under this heavy envelope. And he thought he had tracked him down step by step, embraced on all sides, finally trapped,

when the other, with the gesture of a man pushed to the limit, cried that he had had enough, that he preferred. confess, so that they don't torment him more. Since, all the same, we wanted him to be guilty, at least to be guilty of the real things he had done. But, as he told the story, his wife soiled very young by Grandmorin, her rage of jealousy on learning of this rubbish, and how he had killed, had taken the ten thousand francs, the judge's eyelids rose, with a frown of doubt, while an irresistible disbelief, professional disbelief, distended his mouth in a mocking pout. He was completely smiling when the accused fell silent. The fellow was even stronger than he thought: to take the first murder for himself, to make it a purely passionate crime, to wash himself away from all premeditated theft, especially from all complicity in the murder of Séverine, it was certainly a daring maneuver, which indicated an unusual intelligence and will. Only that did not hold water.

"Come on, Roubaud, you mustn't think we are children… You claim then that you were jealous, it would be in a transport of jealousy that you would have killed?"

—Certainly.

—And if we admit what you say, you would have married your wife, knowing nothing of her relationship with the president… Is it likely? Quite the contrary would prove, in your case, the speculation offered, discussed, accepted. We give you a young girl raised like a young lady, we endow her, her protector becomes yours, you are aware that he leaves her a country house by will, and you pretend that you did not suspect anything, absolutely You're welcome! Come on, you knew everything, otherwise your marriage can no longer be explained… Moreover, the observation of a simple fact is enough to confuse you. You are not jealous, still dare to say that you are jealous.

—I tell the truth, I killed in a rage of jealousy.

—So, after having killed the president for old, vague reports, and which you make up besides, explain to me how you were able to tolerate a lover to your wife, yes, that Jacques Lantier, a solid fellow, that one! Everyone told me about this affair, you yourself didn't hide the fact that you knew it… You let them go together, why?

Collapsed, his eyes blurry, Roubaud stared at the void, without finding an explanation. He ended up

stammering:- I don’t know… I killed the other, I did not kill this one.

—Do not tell me any more that you are a jealous one who takes revenge, and I do not advise you to repeat this novel to the gentlemen of the jury, because they would shrug their shoulders… Believe me, change the system, the truth only you would be saved.

From that moment, the more Roubaud persisted in telling it, this truth, the more he was convinced of a lie. Everything, moreover, turned against him, to such an extent that his former interrogation, during the first investigation, which should have supported his new version, since he had denounced Cabuche there, became on the contrary the proof. of an extraordinarily skilful understanding between them. The judge refined the psychology of the case, with a real love of the profession. Never, he said, had he descended so deeply from human nature; and it was guesswork more than observation, for he flattered himself that he belonged to the school of voyeuristic and fascinating judges, those who at a glance dismantle a man. The proofs, moreover, were no longer lacking, an overwhelming whole. Now education had a solid foundation, certainty shone dazzlingly like sunlight.

And what further increased the glory of M. Denizet was that he brought the double affair in one block, after having reconstituted it. patiently, in the deepest secrecy. Since the noisy success of the plebiscite, a fever had not ceased to agitate the country, like this vertigo which precedes and announces great catastrophes. It was, in the society of this end of empire, in politics, especially in the press, a continual anxiety, an exaltation in which joy itself took on a morbid violence. Also, when, after the assassination of a woman, at the bottom of this isolated house of Croix-de-Maufras, we learned by what stroke of genius the examining magistrate of Rouen had just exhumed the old Grandmorin affair and to relate it to the new crime, was there an explosion of triumph among the unofficial newspapers. From time to time, in fact, the jokes about the legendary assassin who could not be found again reappeared in the opposition papers, this invention of the police, put forward to hide the depravities of certain great compromised personages. And the answer was going to be decisive, the assassin and his accomplice were arrested, the memory of President Grandmorin would emerge from the adventure intact. The polemics started again, the emotion grew day by day, in Rouen and in Paris. Apart from this atrocious novel

which haunted the imaginations, we were passionate, as if the truth finally discovered, irrefutable, should consolidate the State. During all one week, the press was overflowing with details.

Summoned to Paris, Mr. Denizet presented himself in the rue du Rocher, at the personal home of the secretary general, Mr. Camy-Lamotte. He found him standing in the middle of his stern cabinet, his face thin, and more tired; for he was declining, invaded by a sadness in his skepticism, as if he had sensed, under this burst of apotheosis, the approaching collapse of the regime he served. For two days, he had been in the grip of an internal struggle, not yet knowing what use he would make of Séverine's letter, which he had kept, this letter which would have ruined the whole system of the accusation, by supporting the version of Séverine. Roubaud of a proof indisputable. No one in the world knew her, he could destroy her. But, the day before, the emperor had told him that he demanded, this time, that justice follow its course, without any influence, even if his government was to suffer: a simple cry of honesty, perhaps. the superstition that one unjust act, after the country's acclaim, would change fate. And if the Secretary General had no qualms about his conscience, having reduced the affairs of this world to a simple question of mechanics, he was disturbed by the order received, he wondered whether he should love his master. to the point of disobeying him.

At once M. Denizet triumphed.

—Well, my flair had not deceived me, it was this Cabuche who had struck the president… Only, I agree, the other track also contained a little of the truth, and I felt me - even as the case of Roubaud remained suspicious… Finally, we have them both.

M. Camy-Lamotte was staring at him fixedly with his pale eyes.

"So all the facts in the file that I was given are proven, and your conviction is absolute?"

—Absolute, no hesitation possible… Everything is linked, I do not remember a case where, despite the apparent complications, the crime followed a more logical course, easier to determine in advance.

—But Roubaud protests, takes the first murder for himself, tells a story, his wife deflowered, panicking him with jealousy, killing in a fit of blind rage. The opposition sheets all tell this.

—Oh! they tell it like gossip, not daring to believe it themselves. Jealous, this Roubaud who facilitated his wife's meetings with a lover! Ah! he can, in full seated, repeat this tale, he will not succeed in raising the scandal sought! … If he provided some further proof! but it does not produce anything. He speaks well of the letter which he claims to have had his wife write and which should have been found in the victim's papers… VYou, Mr. Secretary-General, who filed these papers, you would have found it, wouldn't you?

M. Camy-Lamotte did not reply. It was true, the scandal was going to be finally buried, with the system of the judge: no one would believe Roubaud, the memory of the president would be cleared of abominable suspicions, the empire would benefit from this rowdy rehabilitation of one of its creatures. And, besides, since this Roubaud admitted himself guilty, what did it matter to the idea of justice whether he was condemned for one version or the other! There was indeed Cabuche; but, if this one had not been soaked in the first murder, it seemed to be really the author of the second. Then, my God! justice, what a final illusion ! Wanting to be fair, wasn't that a decoy, when the truth is so covered with brush? It was better to be wise, to support this dying society, which threatened to ruin, with a boost.

—Is not it? repeated M. Denizet, "you haven't found that letter?"

Again M. Camy-Lamotte raised his eyes to him; and calmly, the sole master of the situation, taking for his conscience the remorse which had worried the Emperor, he replied:

"I have found absolutely nothing."

Then, smiling, very kind, he showered the judge with praise. AT barely a slight fold of the lips he indicated an invincible irony. Never had an investigation been conducted with so much insight; and, it was decided in high places, he would be called as an advisor in Paris, after the holidays. He led him back to the landing.

—You alone have seen clearly, it is truly admirable… And, as long as the truth speaks, there is nothing that can stop it, neither the interests of people, nor even the reason of state… Walk, let the case take its course, whatever the consequences.

"The duty of the magistracy is entirely there," concluded M. Denizet, who bowed and left, beaming.

When he was alone, M. Camy-Lamotte first lit a candle; then he went to take Séverine's letter from the drawer where he had filed it. The candle was burning very high, he unfolded the letter, wanted to reread the two lines; and the memory evoked of that delicate criminal, with periwinkle eyes, who had once stirred him with such tender sympathy. Now she was dead, he saw her tragic again. Who knew the secret she must have taken away? Certainly, yes, an illusion, truth, justice! All that remained for him, of this unknown and charming woman, was the desire for a minute with which she had touched him and which he had not satisfied. And, as he approached the letter of the candle, and that it was ablaze, he was seized with great sadness, a foreboding of misfortune: what was the use of destroying this proof, charging his conscience with this action, if the fate was that the empire was swept away, as well as the pinch of black ash that fell from his fingers?

In less than a week, Mr. Denizet completed the investigation. He found in the Company of the West an extreme good will, all the desirable documents, all the useful testimonies; because she also wanted very much to put an end to this deplorable story of one of her employees, who, going back through the complicated cogs of her body, had almost shaken up to its board of directors. The gangrenous member had to be cut as quickly as possible. Also, again, the personnel of the station of Le Havre, M. Dabadie, Moulin and the others, paraded in the judge's office, who gave disastrous details on Roubaud's bad behavior; then, the station master of Barentin, M. Bessière, as well as several employees of Rouen, whose depositions were of decisive importance, relative to the first murder; then, Mr. Vandorpe, the station master of Paris, the stationary Misard and the chief conductor Henri Dauvergne, the latter two very affirmative on the conjugal complacency of the accused. Even Henri, whom Séverine had treated at the Croix-de-Maufras, related that one evening, still weakened, he thought he had heard the voices of Roubaud and Cabuche concerting in front of his window; which explained many things and overturned the system of the two accused, who pretended not to know each other. In all the personnel of the Company, a cry of reprobation was raised, one pained the unfortunate victims, this poor young woman whose fault had so many excuses, this so honorable old man, today washed away from the bad stories which were running. on his account.

But the new trial had above all aroused strong passions in the Grandmorin family, and, on this side, if Mr. Denizet still found a powerful aid, he had to fight to safeguard the integrity of his education. The Lachesnayes sang victory, because they had always affirmed the guilt of Roubaud, exasperated by the legacy of the Croix-de-Maufras, bleeding with avarice. Thus, in the return of the affair, they saw only an opportunity to attack the will; and, as there was only one way to obtain the revocation of the legacy, that of striking Séverine with the forfeiture of ingratitude, they partially accepted the version of Roubaud, the woman accomplice, helping her to kill, no. not to take revenge for an imaginary infamy, but to steal it; so that the judge entered conflict with them, especially with Berthe, very harsh against the assassinated, her old friend, whom she abominably charged, and whom she defended, warming up, getting carried away, as soon as one touched on her masterpiece, this edifice of logic, so well constructed, as he himself declared with an air of pride, that if one moved a single piece of it, everything collapsed. On this subject, there was a very lively scene in his study between the Lachesnayes and Madame Bonnehon. The latter, formerly favorable to the Roubauds, had had to abandon the husband; but she continued to support the woman, by a kind of tender complicity, very tolerant of charm and love, all upset of this tragic romantic, splashed with blood. It was very clear, full of disdain for money. Wasn’t her niece ashamed to come back to this question of inheritance? Séverine guilty, weren’t Roubaud’s alleged confessions to be fully accepted, the memory of the president sullied again? The truth, if education had not so ingeniously established it, it would have had to be invented, for the honor of the family. And she spoke with a little bitterness of the society of Rouen, where the affair made so much noise, this society over which she no longer reigned, now that age was coming and that she was losing even her opulent beauty. goddess blonde aged. Yes, the day before, at Madame Leboucq’s, the adviser’s wife, that tall elegant brunette who dethroned her, they had whispered cheerful anecdotes, Louisette’s adventure, everything that public malignancy invented. At this moment, Mr. Denizet having intervened, to inform him that Mr. Leboucq would sit as assessor at the next assizes, the Lachesnaye fell silent, appearing to give in, taken with concern. But Madame Bonnehon reassured them, certain that justice would do its duty: the assizes would be chaired by her old friend, Mr. Desbazeilles, to whom

his rheumatism only allowed the memory, and the second assessor was to be Mr. Chaumette, the father of the young substitute she was protecting. She was therefore quiet, although a melancholy smile had appeared on her lips, naming the last one, whose son had been seen for some time at Madame Leboucq’s, where she sent him herself, so as not to hinder her future.

When the famous trial finally came, the rumor of an approaching war, the agitation which was spreading throughout France, greatly reduced the impact of the debates. Rouen nonetheless spent three days in a fever, people crashed at the doors of the hall, the reserved places were invaded by ladies from the city. The former palace of the Dukes of Normandy had never seen such an influx of people, since its development into a courthouse. It was in the last days of June, hot and sunny afternoons, the vivid light of which lit the stained - glass windows of the ten windows, flooding the oak paneling with light, the white stone Calvary which stood out against the red curtain at the bottom. strewn with bees, the famous ceiling of the time of Louis XII, with its carved and gilded wooden compartments, of a very soft old gold. We were already suffocating before the audience opened. Women stood up to see, on the exhibits table, Grandmorin’s watch, Séverine’s blood- stained shirt and the knife that had been used by the two. murders. The defender of Cabuche, a lawyer from Paris, was also very watched. Twelve Rouennais lined up in the jury’s benches, strapped into black frock coats, thick and serious. And, when the court entered, there was such a surge in the standing audience that the President immediately had to threaten to evacuate the hall.

Finally, the debates were open, the jurors were sworn in, and the call of witnesses again stirred the crowd with a quiver of curiosity: at the names of Madame Bonnehon and M. de Lachesnaye, heads waved; but Jacques, above all, fascinated the ladies, who followed him with their eyes. Besides, since the defendants were there, each between two gendarmes, glances never left them, appreciations were exchanged. They looked fierce and low, two bandits. Roubaud, with his dark-colored jacket, cravat like a gentleman who neglects himself, surprised by his aged air, his dazed face and dying of fat. As for Cabuche, he was just as we imagined him to be, dressed in a long blue blouse, the very type of the murderer, enormous fists, the jaws of a predator, well one of those fellows he never knew. not good to meet at the corner of a wood. And the interrogations confirmed this bad impression,

some answers raised violent murmurs. To all the president's questions, Cabuche replied that he did not know: he did not know how the watch was at home, he did not know why he had let the real assassin flee; and he stuck to his story of this mysterious stranger, whose gallop he said he had heard in the depths of darkness. Then, questioned about his bestial passion for his unfortunate victim, he began to stammer, in such sudden and violent anger that the two gendarmes grabbed him by the arms: no, no! he did not love her, he did not want her, they were lies, he would have thought to sully her, just wanting her, she who was a lady, while what had imprisoned him and lived as a savage! Then, calmed down, he fell into a gloomy silence, releasing only monosyllables, indifferent to the condemnation that could strike him. Likewise, Roubaud stuck to what the prosecution called his system: he told how and why he had killed Grandmorin, he denied any participation in the assassination of his wife; but he did it in broken, almost incoherent sentences, with sudden loss of memory, his eyes so cloudy, his voice so thick that he seemed at times to search and invent details. And, the president pushing him, showing him the absurdities of his story, he ends up raising the shoulders, he refused to answer: what was the point of telling the truth, since it was the lie that made sense? This attitude of aggressive disdain for justice did him the greatest harm. We also noticed the profound disinterestedness in which the two accused were one of the other, as a proof of prior agreement, a whole clever plan, followed with an extraordinary force of will. They pretended not to know each other, they even took charge, only to confuse the court. When the interrogations were over, the case was judged, so the president had conducted them with skill, so that Roubaud and Cabuche, tumbling into the traps set, appeared to have surrendered themselves. On that day a few more unimportant witnesses were heard. The heat had become so unbearable, around five o'clock, that two ladies passed out.

But, the next day, the great emotion was for the hearing of certain witnesses. Madame Bonnehon had a real success of distinction and tact. We listened with interest to the employees of the Company, Mr. Vandorpe, Mr. Bessière, Mr. Dabadie, especially Mr. Cauche, the latter very verbose, who told how he knew Roubaud a lot, having often played his part with him, at the café. Trade. Henri Dauvergne repeated his damning testimony, the almost certainty in which he was to have, in the drowsiness of the fever,

heard the muffled voices of the two accused, who were consulting each other; and, questioned about Séverine, he was very discreet, made it clear that he had loved her, but that knowing her to another, he had loyally withdrawn. So when this other, Jacques Lantier, was finally introduced, a buzz rose from the crowd, people rose to see him better, there was even, among the jurors, a passionate movement of attention. Jacques, very calm, leaned on the witness stand with both hands, with the professional gesture he was accustomed to when he was driving his machine. This appearance which should have disturbed him deeply, left him in complete lucidity of mind, as if nothing of the matter concerned him. He was going to testify as a stranger, as an innocent person; since the crime not a shiver had come to him, he did not even think of these things, his memory abolished, the organs in a state of equilibrium, of perfect health; there again, at this bar, he had neither remorse nor scruples, absolutely unconscious. Immediately he looked at Roubaud and Cabuche with his clear eyes. The first, he knew he was guilty, he gave him a slight nod, a discreet bow, without thinking that he was openly today his wife's lover. Then, he smiled at the second, the innocent, whose place he should have occupied, on this bench: a good beast at the bottom, under his bandit air, a fellow he had seen at work, with whom he had shook hands. And, full of ease, he testified, he answered in short, neat sentences the questions of the president, who, after having questioned him without measure on his relationship with the victim, made him tell about his departure from Croix-de-Maufras, a few hours before the murder, how he had gone to take the train in Barentin, how he had slept in Rouen. Cabuche and Roubaud listened to him, confirmed his answers by their attitude; and at that moment, between these three men, there arose an unspeakable sadness. A dead silence had fallen in the room, an emotion came did not know whence the jurors clenched for a moment by their throats: it was the truth which passed, silent. When asked by the president, wanting to know what he thought of the stranger, vanished in the shadows, of which the quarryman was speaking, Jacques contented himself with nodding his head, as if he had not wanted to overwhelm an accused. And then a fact occurred, which completely overwhelmed the audience. Tears appeared in Jacques' eyes, overflowed, streamed down his cheeks. As he had seen her already, Séverine had just mentioned the miserable murderer whose image he had taken away, with her blue eyes widened inordinately,

her black hair straight on her forehead, like a helmet. of terror. He still adored her, an immense pity had seized him, and he wept for her with great tears, in the unconsciousness of her crime, forgetting where he was, among this crowd. Ladies, overcome by emotion, sobbed. This pain of the lover, when the husband remained with dry eyes, was found extremely touching. The president having asked the defense if they had any questions to put to the witness, the lawyers thanked them, while the dazed defendants watched Jacques, who returned to sit down, amid the general sympathy.

First, the president presented a summary of the case, where, under an affectation of absolute impartiality, the charges of the prosecution were aggravated. The imperial prosecutor, then, did not seem to enjoy all his means: he usually had more conviction, less empty eloquence. This was blamed on the heat, which was really overwhelming. On the contrary, Cabuche's defender, the lawyer from Paris, gave great pleasure, without convincing. The defender of Roubaud, a distinguished member of the Rouen bar, also drew all he could from his bad cause. Tired, the prosecution did not even respond. And, when the jury passed into the deliberations, it was only six o'clock, daylight was still entering through the ten windows, a last ray lit the arms of the towns of Normandy, which decorate the transoms with them. A great sound of voices rose under the ancient gilded ceiling, bursts of impatience shook the iron gate, separating the reserved seats from the standing public. But the silence became religious again as soon as the jury and the court reappeared. The verdict admitted mitigating circumstances, the court sentenced the two men to hard labor for life. And it was a great surprise, the crowd tumbled away, a few whistles were heard, as at the theater.

Throughout Rouen, the same evening, we were talking about this sentence, with endless comments. According to the general opinion, it was a failure for Madame Bonnehon and for the Lachesnaye. A death sentence alone, it seemed, would have satisfied the family; and, surely, adverse influences had acted. Already, Madame Leboucq was being whispered, who counted three or four of her faithful among the jurors. The attitude of her husband, as assessor, had doubtless offered nothing wrong; however, we thought we had noticed that neither the other assessor, M. Chaumette, nor even the president, M. Desbazeilles, had felt themselves to be the masters of the debates, as much as they would have liked. Perhaps, simply, the jury,

seized with scruples, had just, by granting mitigating circumstances, yielded to the uneasiness of this doubt which had crossed the hall for a moment, the silent flight of melancholy truth. Moreover, the affair remained the triumph of the examining magistrate, Mr. Denizet, whose masterpiece nothing had been able to undermine; because the family itself lost a lot of sympathy, when the rumor spread that, in order to regain the Croix-de-Maufras, M. de Lachesnaye, contrary to the jurisprudence, spoke of bringing an action for revocation, despite the death of the donee, which was astonishing on the part of a magistrate.

On leaving the Palace, Jacques was joined by Philomène, who was remained as a witness; and she never let him go, retaining him, trying to spend that night with him in Rouen. He was not to resume his duty until the next day, he was kind enough to keep her for dinner in the inn where he claimed to have slept on the night of the crime, near the station; but he would not sleep, he was absolutely forced to return to Paris by the midnight fifty train.

“You don’t know,” she said, as she walked towards the inn with his arm, “I would swear that earlier I saw someone we know… Yes, Pecqueux, who kept telling me, the other day, that he would not leave his feet in Rouen, for the business… One moment, I turned around, a man, whose back I only saw, spun through the crowd…

The mechanic interrupted him, shrugging his shoulders.

—Pecqueux is in Paris, having a wedding, too happy with the vacation that my leave gives him.

—It’s possible… No matter, let us beware, because it is indeed the dirtiest bitch, when it rages.

She leaned against him, she added, with a glance back:

“And that one who follows us, do you know him?”

—Yes, don’t worry… He might have something to ask of me.

It was Misard, who, in fact, from the rue des Juifs, accompanied them from a distance. He, too, had deposited with an air sleepy; and he remained, prowling around Jacques, without making up his mind to ask him a question, which he clearly had on his lips. When the couple had disappeared in the inn, he entered in his turn, he was served a glass of wine.

—Hey, it’s you, Misard! cried the mechanic. And, with your new wife, are you okay?

“Yes, yes,” growled the stationary. Ah! the bougresse, she fucked me up in it. Huh? I told you that on my other trip here.

Jacques was very happy with this story. La Ducloux, the old sleazy maid Misard had taken to guard the barrier, had quickly noticed, seeing him search the corners, that he had to look for a loot, hidden by his deceased; and a genius idea had occurred to her, to get married, that of letting her understand, through reluctance, through little laughter, that she had found him. First, he had almost strangled her; then, thinking that the thousand francs would still escape him, if he suppressed her like the other, before having them, he had become very affectionate, very kind; but she pushed him away, she didn’t even want him to touch her any more: no, no, when she was his wife, he would have everything, her and the money in addition. And he’d married her, and she’d laughed at him, calling him too dumb, believing everything she was told. The beautiful, it was that, being informed, turning on herself at the contagion of her fever, she now searched with him, so enraged. Ah! these thousand francs untraceable, they would find them one day, now that they were two! They were looking, they were looking.

—So still nothing? asked Jacques mockingly. Isn’t she helping you, La Ducloux?

Misard stared at him; and he spoke at last.

—You know where they are, tell me.

But the mechanic got angry.

—I don’t know anything at all, Aunt Phasie didn’t give me anything, you wo n’t accuse me of theft, perhaps!

—Oh! she gave you nothing: that is of course… You see that I am sick of it. If you know where they are, let me know.

—He! go fuck yourself! Take care that I don’t talk too much… So see in the salt box, if they are there.

Pale, eyes fiery, Misard continued to look at him. He had a sudden enlightenment.

—In the salt box, look! it is true. There is a hiding place under the drawer where I haven’t searched.

And he hastened to pay for his glass of wine, and he ran to the railroad, to see if he could still catch the seven- ten train. There, in the little low house, he would search forever.

In the evening, after dinner, waiting for the midnight train fifty, Philomène wanted to take Jacques, through dark alleys, to the next countryside. It was very muggy, a hot, moonless July night, which made her throat swell with heavy sighs, almost hanging from her neck. Twice, having thought she heard footsteps behind them, she had turned around, not seeing anyone, so thick was the darkness. He suffered a lot from that stormy night. In his tranquil equilibrium, that perfect health which he had enjoyed since the murder, he had felt a distant uneasiness at table a little while ago, each time this woman had touched him with her wandering hands. Fatigue, no doubt, a nervousness caused by the gravity of the air. Now the anguish of desire was reborn more sharply, full of dull terror, to hold her like this, against her body. However, he was well healed, the experiment was made, since he had already possessed it, the flesh calm, to realize. His excitement became such that the fear of a fit would have made him free himself from his arms, if the shadow which drowned her had not reassured him; for never, even in the worst days of his illness, would he have knocked without seeing. And, all of a sudden, as they were passing near a grassy embankment, in a deserted road, and she was dragging him there, lying down, the monstrous need took over him, a rage, he searched among the grass for a weapon, a stone, to crush his head. With a shake, he got up, and he was already fleeing, bewildered, and he heard a man’s voice, curses, a whole battle.

—Ah! bitch, I waited until the end, I wanted to be sure!

—It is not true, let go of me!

—Ah! this is not true! He can run, the other! I know who it is, I will catch up with him! … Here! bitch, say again that it is not true!

Jacques galloped through the night, not to escape Pecqueux, whom he had just recognized; but he was running away from himself, mad with grief.

What! a murder was not enough, he was not satisfied Séverine’s blood, as he believed, still in the morning? Now he was starting again. Another, and then another, and then always another! As soon as he had satiated, after a few weeks of torpor, his dreadful hunger would wake up, he would constantly need the flesh of a woman to satisfy it. Even now, he didn’t need to see her, this seductive flesh : just to feel her warm in his arms, he gave in to the heat of crime, like a fierce male who disembowels females. It was the

end of life, there was nothing left before him except that deep night, of boundless despair, into which he was fleeing.

A few days passed. Jacques had resumed his service, avoiding his comrades, relapsed into his former anxious savagery. War had just been declared, after stormy sessions in the Chamber; and there had already been a little outpost fight, happy, they said. For the past week, the personnel carriers had been crushing the railway personnel with fatigue. The regular services were broken, continual unforeseen trains caused considerable delays; not to mention that the best mechanics had been requisitioned to activate the concentration of the army corps. And so it was one evening in Le Havre, Jacques, instead of his usual express, had to drive an enormous train, eighteen wagons, absolutely. crowded with soldiers.

That evening, Pecqueux arrived at the depot very drunk. The day after he had surprised Philomène and Jacques, he got back on machine 608, as driver, with the latter; and, since that time, he made no allusion, gloomy, seeming not to dare to look at his boss. But the latter felt more and more revolted, refusing to obey, welcoming him with a low growl, as soon as he gave him an order. They had ended up completely ceasing to speak to each other. This moving sheet, this little bridge which once carried them away, so united, was now only the narrow and dangerous plank which collided with their rivalry. Hatred grew, they were devouring each other in these few square feet, spinning at full speed, and whence the slightest shock would have precipitated them. And that evening, seeing Pecqueux drunk, Jacques was suspicious; for he knew he was too devious to get angry on an empty stomach, the wine alone unleashed the brute in him.

The train, which was due to leave around six o’clock, was delayed. It was already dark when the soldiers were loaded like sheep into cattle wagons. We had simply nailed planks for benches, we piled them in there, in squads, stuffing the cars beyond the possible; so good that they were sitting there one on top of the other, some standing, tight not to move an arm. As soon as they arrived in Paris, another train was waiting for them to take them to the Rhine. They were already crushed with fatigue, in the bewilderment of their departure. But, as they had been given brandy, and many had spread to the neighborhood sellers, they had a heated and brutal gaiety, very red, eyes out of their heads. And, as soon as the train moved out of the station, they began to sing.

Jacques immediately looked at the sky, the stars of which were hidden in a stormy vapor. The night would be very dark, not a breath the scorching air stirred; and the wind of the race, always so cool, seemed warm. On the dark horizon there were no other fires than the bright sparks of signals. He increased the pressure to cross the great ramp from Harfleur to Saint-Romain. Despite the study he had been making of her for weeks, he was not yet master of the machine 608, too new, whose whims and youthful differences surprised him. That night, in particular, he felt that she was reluctant, whimsical, ready to get carried away for a few extra bits of coal. So, with his hand on the gear shift wheel, he watched the fire, more and more worried about his driver's gait. The a small lamp which illuminated the water level, leaving the platform in a semi-darkness, which the door of the hearth, reddened, made purple. He could hardly make out Pecqueux, his legs had twice felt the sensation of brushing, as if fingers had been exercised to take him there. But it was undoubtedly only a drunkard's clumsiness, for he heard her, in the noise, snickering very loudly, breaking his coal with exaggerated blows of the hammer, fighting with the shovel. Every minute, he opened the door, threw fuel on the grate, in unreasonable quantities.

—Enough! cried Jacques.

The other affected not to understand, continued to put shovels in quick succession; and, as the mechanic grasped his arm, he turned, threateningly, finally holding the quarrel he sought, in the mounting fury of his intoxication.

—Do not touch, or I knock! … it amuses me, me, that we go quickly!

The train was now traveling at full speed on the plateau which goes from Bolbec to Motteville. He had to go straight to Paris, without any stopping, except at the points marked to take water. The enormous mass, the eighteen wagons, loaded and crowded with human cattle, traversed the black countryside, in a continuous rumble. And these men who were being carried to the massacre, sang, sang at the top of their lungs, with a clamor so loud that she dominated the noise of the wheels.

Jacques had closed the door with his foot. Then, maneuvering the injector, still containing himself:

—There is too much fire… Sleep, if you are drunk.

Immediately, Pecqueux reopened, bent on adding more coal, as if he wanted to blow up the machine. It was the revolt, the unknown orders, the exasperated passion which no longer took into account all these human lives. And, Jacques having bent down himself to lower the stem of the ashtray, so as to at least reduce the draft, the driver suddenly seized him with his arms around him, tried to push him, to throw him on the track, a violent shock.

—Gredin, that was it then! … Was it not? you would say I fell, you devious bastard!

He had caught up with one of the edges of the tender, and they both slipped, the fight continued on the small tin bridge, which danced violently. Teeth clenched, they no longer spoke, they forced each other to rush through the narrow opening, which only an iron bar closed. But it was not convenient, the devouring machine was rolling, still rolling; and Barentin was passed, and the train rushed into the Malaunay tunnel, which they still held tightly, sprawled in the coal, banging their heads against the walls of the water container, avoiding the reddened door of the hearth, where their legs were roasted every time they stretched them out.

For a moment Jacques thought that, if he could get up, he would close the regulator, call for help, so that he could be rid of this furious madman, enraged with drunkenness and jealousy. He was weakening, smaller, desperate to find now the strength to precipitate him, already defeated, feeling the terror of the fall pass through his hair. As he made a supreme effort, groping his hand, the other understood, stiffened on his back, lifted him like a child.

—Ah! you want to stop… Ah! you took my wife from me… Go go, you have to go!

The machine was rolling, rolling, the train had just come out of the tunnel with a great crash, and it continued on its course, through the empty and dark countryside. The Malaunay station was passed in such a gust of wind that the deputy, standing on the quay, did not even see these two men devouring each other while the lightning was blowing them away.

But Pecqueux, with a last dash, precipitated Jacques; and the latter, feeling the void, bewildered, clung to her neck so tightly that he dragged her away. There were two terrible cries, which mingled, which were lost. The two men, fallen together, dragged under the wheels by the reaction of

speed, were cut, chopped, in their embrace, in this frightful embrace, they who had lived so long as brothers. They were found without head, without feet, two bloody trunks which still clenched, as if to suffocate.

And the machine, free of any direction, rolled, still rolled. Finally, the restive, the whimsical, could give way to the ardor of her youth, like a still untamed run, escaped from the hands of the guardian, galloping through the low countryside. The boiler was provided with water, the coal with which the hearth had just been filled was set ablaze; and, during the first half hour, the pressure mounted wildly, the speed became frightening. Without Doubt, the chief conductor, giving in to fatigue, had fallen asleep. The soldiers, whose drunkenness increased, at being thus crowded together, suddenly rejoiced at this violent race, sang louder. We crossed Maromme in love at first sight. There was no longer a whistle when the signals approached, when the stations passed. It was galloping straight ahead, the beast rushing forward, head down and silent, among the obstacles. She rolled, rolled endlessly, as if distraught more and more by the strident noise of her breath.

In Rouen, we had to take water; and terror froze the station, when she saw this mad train pass, in a vertigo of smoke and flame, those cattle wagons filled with troops who howled patriotic refrains. They were going to war, it was to be faster over there, on the banks of the Rhine. The employees stood there gaping, waving their arms. Immediately, the cry was general: never this unbridled train, left to itself, would cross the Sotteville station without hindrance, always blocked by maneuvers, blocked by cars and machines, like all the large depots. And they rushed to the telegraph, they warned. Exactly over there, a freight train which was occupying the track could be driven back under a shed. Already, in the distance, the rolling of the escaped monster could be heard. He is silent rushed into the two tunnels which border Rouen, he came with his furious gallop, like a prodigious and irresistible force that nothing could stop. And the Sotteville station was burned down, he sped through the obstacles without catching anything, he plunged back into the darkness, where his rumbling gradually died down.

But now all the telegraph devices on the line were ringing, all hearts were beating, at the news of the ghost train which had just been seen passing through Rouen and Sotteville. We were trembling with fear: an express which was in front was surely going to be caught. He, like a wild

boar in a forest, continued his course, ignoring the fires red, nor firecrackers. He almost crushed himself at Oissel against a pilot machine; he terrified Pont-de-l'Arche, for his speed did not seem to be slowing down. Once again, gone, he was driving, he was driving, in the dark night, no one knew where, over there.

What did the victims that the machine crushed along the way matter? Wasn't she still going to the future, heedless of the spilled blood? Without a driver, in the midst of darkness, like a blind and deaf beast that one would have let loose among death, she rolled, she rolled, laden with this cannon fodder, with these soldiers, already dazed with fatigue, and drunk, who sang.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Émile Zola (1840–1902) was a French novelist, journalist, and playwright. Born in Paris to a French mother and Italian father, Zola was raised in Aix-en-Provence. At 18, Zola moved back to Paris, where he befriended Paul Cézanne and began his writing career. During this early period, Zola worked as a clerk for a publisher while writing literary and art reviews as well as political journalism for local newspapers. Following the success of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), Zola began a series of twenty novels known as *Les Rougon-Macquart*, a sprawling collection following the fates of a single family living under the Second Empire of Napoleon III. Zola's work earned him a reputation as a leading figure in literary naturalism, a style noted for its rejection of Romanticism in favor of detachment, rationalism, and social commentary. Following the infamous Dreyfus affair of 1894, in which a French-Jewish artillery officer was falsely convicted of spying for the German Embassy, Zola wrote a scathing open letter to French President Félix Faure accusing the government and military of antisemitism and obstruction of justice. Having sacrificed his reputation as a writer and intellectual, Zola helped reverse public opinion on the affair, placing pressure on the government that led to Dreyfus' full exoneration in 1906. Nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1901 and 1902, Zola is considered one of the most influential and talented writers in French history.

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

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